‘No Contemptible Commander: Sir William Howe and the American War of Independence, 1775-1777’

David Smith, BA (Hons), MA

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The University of Chester

Department of History and Archaeology

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Abstract

This thesis examines the period in command of British land forces during the American War of Independence of Sir William Howe. The previously untapped resource of a draft of Howe's famous narrative to the House of Commons underpins the original contribution made by this thesis, which also draws original conclusions from more familiar documents. Howe's command is considered in the light of four major factors: his relationship with subordinate officers; the composition and quality of his army; his relationship with the American Secretary, Lord George Germain; and his personal qualities and experience. These four factors are then combined to consider key tactical and strategic decisions made by Howe while in command of the British army in North America. No attempt has been made to examine every decision or event during Howe's period in command. Rather, those most contentious and controversial events, and those that can be reconsidered using new evidence and new interpretations of existing evidence, have been focussed on. This thesis does not (nor was it intended to) systematically counter the prevailing opinions of Howe set down over more than two centuries of historical works. However, it can be seen that Howe had more reasonable grounds for some of his most contentious decisions than has previously been argued and his overall strategy for 1776 was more coherent than he is generally given credit for.

Contents

List of Maps

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Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
NAM	National Army Museum, Chelsea
NAS	National Archive of Scotland, Edinburgh
TNA	The National Archives, Kew
WCL	William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Notes on style

Eccentric spellings have been changed for the purposes of clarity, but direct quotations have not been modified in any other way.

Rather than endlessly differentiating between the Howe brothers, ‘Howe’ always refers to Sir William.

Introduction

The American War of Independence has provided fertile ground for historians, with many thousands of books considering myriad elements of the conflict. New interpretations of the war appear every year, yet one of the major figures has been neglected. William Howe, who commanded at battles including Bunker Hill, Long Island and White Plains, and who was largely responsible for the formulation of British strategy for the first two campaigns of the war, has not been considered in the depth afforded to other British commanders, including Henry Clinton and John Burgoyne. This is not, however, because he is considered to be an uninteresting subject; Howe is one of the most enigmatic figures in the war and would undoubtedly have featured far more prominently in many of the existing histories were it not for one simple problem: an apparently crippling lack of primary sources on which to draw. The papers of Howe's older brother, the admiral Lord Richard Howe, were destroyed in a fire and it is assumed that the general's papers were also being kept in the library at the family house at Westport, Ireland.[1] Unless Howe's papers are one day found, any historian tackling him must deal with limited resources. Bellamy Partridge's *Sir Billy Howe*, the only biography written on Howe, may be largely superficial, but Partridge is probably correct when he suggests that many writers will have started out to produce a book on Howe, only to 'turn sadly away'[2] when confronted with the scarcity of source material.

More primary sources would doubtless be beneficial to an understanding of Howe, but the absence of a large collection does not make it impossible to come to a clearer understanding of this intriguing character. A large number of letters to, from

[1] Bellamy Partridge, *Sir Billy Howe* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1932), p. viii.
[2] Ibid., p. vii.

or concerning the general does exist, although they are scattered throughout various collections. We do not have the luxury of perusing a personal diary in which Howe clearly explained the many puzzling moments in his command of British land forces in America during the 1776 and 1777 campaigns, but nor do we have to cope with a daunting quantity of written evidence such as that amassed by Sir Henry Clinton, Howe's second-in-command, who felt the need to commit every thought to paper. The limited supply of Howe evidence imposes a certain discipline on anyone who chooses to study him; every sentence must be carefully considered to extract the maximum amount of information and if Howe's true position on many key points may not be easily ascertained, it is often possible to combine elements from several sources to come to a plausible conclusion.

Howe's correspondence with the American Secretary, Lord George Germain, must form one of the cornerstones of any attempt to understand the general's period in command. His letters tended to be limited to a rather dry recounting of events, but insights into his thinking were sometimes offered, at times in a curiously unguarded manner.[3] More revealing of Howe's mood while in America were the many memoranda made by Henry Clinton of private conferences with the commander-in-chief. These are as close as we can get to personal journal entries informing us of how the general felt at several critical periods of the war and, even though presented through the prism of Clinton's growing dissatisfaction with his commanding officer, they are hugely valuable.[4] Further detail on Howe's character can be gleaned from entries in various collections of papers, as well as printed memoirs, including several

[3] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92-95, Military Dispatches, 1774-1778; Lomas, S. C., ed., *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville, Vol. I & Vol. II* (London: Mackie & Co. Ltd, 1904 & 1910); *Parliamentary Register; or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons during the Fifth Session of the Fourteenth Parliament of Great Britain*, Vol. X (London: Wilson and Co. 1802).
[4] WCL, Henry Clinton Papers.

from officers who served under him. Such sources often also give valuable insight into various elements surrounding Howe's command, including the quality of his army and the strength of his opponent.[5]

When raw materials are so scarce, any new source is obviously extremely valuable, like finding a new seam in a mine that was thought to have been exhausted. The emergence of a draft of Howe's famous 'narrative' to the House of Commons is just such a rare find.[6] Although it is impossible to imagine that no one had read this document before it was purchased at the end of 2010 by the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan, it has apparently never been carefully studied with Howe's performance as a general as the primary consideration. Sotheby's auction notes from the sale of the Henry Strachey Papers declared that, although the collection had been known by historians since the end of the nineteenth century, it was not easily accessible (it was part of the personal collection of James S. Copley), and the portion containing the draft of Howe's speech had never been published.[7]

The draft has not been quoted in any book or paper, yet it offers a large amount of compelling new evidence on Howe's own assessment of his command. By studying how his narrative changed from draft to delivery, we can discern where he believed himself to be vulnerable, and where he felt elements needed to be changed prior to public consumption. As well as the many subtle alterations highlighted by the draft, which give added insight into Howe's cautious nature and his distaste for

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[5] Examples include WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers; F. von Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's side, 1776-1778: the diary of General William Howe's aide de camp*, translated by Ernst Kipping and annotated by Samuel Smith (Monmouth Beach, N.J.: Philip Freneau Press, 1974); P. Padelford, ed., *Colonial Panorama 1775: Dr. Robert Honyman's Journal for March and April* (Pasadena: San Pasqual Press, 1939); R. Lamb, *Memoir of His Own Life, by R. Lamb, Serjeant in the Royal Welch Fuzileers* (Dublin: J. Jones, 1811).

[6] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative.

[7] Sotheby's, *The James S. Copley Library: The Henry Strachey Papers*, (auction catalogue), Oct. 2010, p. 10.

punitive warfare, there is also the major revelation that he was let down by the Hessian contingent of his army at White Plains, and his apparent lack of concern over the progress of Burgoyne's army from Canada, in 1777, is underlined by evidence suggesting he failed to understand fully what the Hudson strategy was meant to achieve. The draft is also notable for the level of confusion often evident in Howe's effort to explain exactly what had happened in America during his period in command, although this is rather cold comfort for a historian attempting to do the same.

Such a major new source of primary evidence inevitably forms a major part of this thesis, yet a new interpretation of Howe's leadership is also possible simply by careful scrutiny of the documents that have been known about for decades or even centuries. These documents, including correspondence with Germain and with his fellow generals, have formed the basis of the small number of works to deal with Howe in depth, as well as a larger number in which he is just a bit player.[8] In these works, Howe does not often emerge unscathed; he has been pilloried as an incompetent, a traitor, a slow-witted blunderer, a careless libertine, a man out of his depth – in short, the perfect opponent for the rebels' own inexperienced leader, General George Washington.[9]

Such criticism would have seemed unthinkable as Britain embarked on its unprecedented effort to win back control over the rebellious colonies in 1775. Howe was a highly regarded figure, having distinguished himself during the French and Indian War two decades previously and, most importantly, having demonstrated

[8] Partridge, *Sir Billy Howe*; T. S. Anderson, *The Command of the Howe Brothers During the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936); I. D. Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1972).
[9] W. B. Willcox, *Portrait of a General: Sir Henry Clinton in the War of Independence* (New York: Alfred A, Knopf, 1964). Willcox commented on the variety of accusations hurled at Howe and asserted that no conclusions could be drawn unless new evidence surfaced.

himself as a modern-thinking military man.[10] Howe had gained valuable experience in effective light infantry tactics in North America, and had developed a system of drill for light infantry in 1774.[11] He was considered both brave and innovative, yet just over two years after taking over the besieged British army at Boston, he was the subject of a storm of protest over his lack of results. Two main charges stand out as most frustrating to Howe's critics: his ponderousness and his inability to grasp repeated opportunities for a decisive victory.[12] Regarding the former charge, Howe started as he meant to go on; after assuming command of the British army in August 1775, he took a full year before mounting an offensive operation. When he did move, however, he moved with effect. He routed Washington's forces at the Battle of Long Island (27 August 1776), but failed to complete his victory. Washington's badly shaken army was able to evacuate under the noses of the British and regroup on York Island (now Manhattan).

Howe proceeded to follow a repeating pattern. Slowness to move was followed time and again with operations that invited debate and dissent. He landed at Kip's Bay when he might have landed further north and trapped Washington on Manhattan. He landed at Frog's Neck when, again, a more imaginative movement could have placed his army behind the Americans. He landed at Pell's Point and then shadowed the rebels' none-too-hasty march to White Plains, where, unhurried by Howe, they were able to take up a commanding defensive position. Howe's decisions

[10] A. O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Command During the Revolutionary War and the Preservation of Empire* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013), pp. 83-84.
[11] NAM, 'Discipline established by Major General Howe for Light Infantry in Battalion, Sarum September 1774'.
[12] Examples of the most vociferous criticism include J. Galloway, *Letters to a Nobleman on Conduct of the War in the Middle Colonies* (London: Printed for J. Wilkie, 1779), p. 47; I. Mauduit, *Strictures on the Philadelphia Mischianza or Triumph Upon Leaving America Unconquered* (London: Printed for J. Bew, Pater-Noster-Row, 1779), pp. 4-5.

were widely questioned by fellow officers, most notably Major General Sir Henry Clinton, who repeatedly pressed his idea of getting in the rear of the rebel army and trapping them *en masse*.[13] Howe's failure to assault the American lines at White Plains invited further criticism and, following the capture of Forts Washington and Lee, a ponderous pursuit of Washington's disintegrating army brought the 1776 campaign to a frustratingly inconclusive end. Washington was then able to put what was left of his army to good use with small, morale-boosting victories at Trenton and Princeton.

Prior to these two setbacks, Howe's conduct of the campaign had met with approval from his superiors (he was awarded the Order of the Bath) but several of his contemporaries, army and navy men alike, were dissatisfied with his painstaking approach and apparently excessive caution.[14] Sir George Collier, of the frigate *Rainbow*, wrote of the 'strange delay'[15] between the Battle of Long Island and the landing on Manhattan, while Clinton criticised almost every decision made by Howe.[16]

Events would show that 1776 was Howe's high-water mark. Though questioned for his deliberate planning and slowness of movement, the campaign was a positive blur of activity compared to the one that followed. The key element to consider when attempting to understand Howe's painfully slow progress in 1777 appears to be the fact that, by April of that year, he felt that the administration at

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[13] W. B. Willcox, ed., *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 40, pp. 44-45, p. 48.
[14] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 367-368, Germain to Howe, 18 Oct. 1776.
[15] C. Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: The War for America, 1770-1781* (London: Grafton, 1993), p. 125.
[16] Detailing all of Clinton's criticisms would take pages, but representative examples can be found for the failure to follow up the victory on Long Island, the decision to land at Kip's Bay and the slow pursuit of Washington through New Jersey in Willcox, ed., *The American Rebellion*, pp. 43-44, p. 45 and pp. 55-56, respectively.

home had lost confidence in him.[17] Howe's request for a reinforcement of 15,000 men at the end of 1776 was perhaps unrealistic given the extraordinary efforts made to put together an effective army for the opening campaign of the war, efforts that had stretched the cumbersome British military infrastructure to its limit and had required the hiring of German troops at considerable expense. When Lord George Germain (who admitted to being 'really alarmed'[18] at Howe's request for such a large-scale reinforcement) attempted to fudge the numbers in an effort to satisfy him with less, Howe instantly pointed out that any hopes of ending the war in 1777 were therefore at an end.[19]

It was in this frame of mind that Howe allowed months of campaigning weather to pass before finally removing his army from Jersey and travelling by sea to the Head of Elk. Howe then defeated Washington at the Brandywine, again drawing criticism (though with less justification here than at Long Island) for not turning an advantage into a decisive victory, before occupying Philadelphia and effectively ending operations for the year. If Howe's objective and methods caused puzzlement (Clinton neatly termed Philadelphia 'a fitter object to close than to begin the campaign with,'[20] although Howe managed the tricky feat of doing both), the fact that he had totally neglected the southward movement of Sir John Burgoyne's army from Canada was considered calamitous. Without the planned-for support (a two-pronged movement on the Hudson River had been the keystone of British strategy since the

[17] W. Howe, *The Narrative of Lieut. Gen. Sir William Howe, in a Committee of the House of Commons, on the 29th of April, 1779, Relative to his Conduct, During his Late Command of the King's Troops in North America* (London: H. Baldwin, 1780, Second Edition), p. 14.
[18] The National Archives, PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 1-6, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777.
[19] *Ibid.* ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.
[20] *The American Rebellion*, ed. Willcox, p. 61.

end of 1775), Burgoyne's army was defeated at Saratoga, clearing the way for direct French intervention in the rebellion.[21]

By October, 1777, Howe was asking to be relieved of his command, citing the loss of the 'confidence and support'[22] of his superiors, and he finally left America on 24 May 1778. Clinton took over, already thoroughly disenchanted with the war. He had claimed in conversation with Howe to be planning to make the 1777 campaign in America his last, but was persuaded to reconsider when the carrot of overall command was dangled before him.[23]

Howe's part in the War of Independence was at an end, but the controversy over his performance was just getting started. Howe's perception that the administration was not supportive enough of him (failing, in his opinion, to speak out definitively and confirm they were satisfied with his performance while commander-in-chief), led to he and his brother forcing an inquiry before a committee comprised of the entire House of Commons.[24] The Howe Inquiry, which opened on 22 April 1779, offered the beleaguered general the chance to set out clearly his own thoughts on the two campaigns he had led in the colonies, but he opened proceedings with a long, rambling speech that did anything but set things out clearly.[25] Howe could have expected, and would no doubt have received, a thorough grilling on his conduct and elements of his narrative had his opponents wished, but the administration, in the form of Lords North and Germain, was not interested in trying to apportion blame, fearing that if too much scrutiny were applied to the failing war effort in America,

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[21] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 200-206, Dartmouth to Gage, 2 Aug. 1775. *Ibid.* ff. 237-240, Dartmouth to Howe, 5 Sept. 1775. *Ibid.* ff. 311-316, Howe to Dartmouth, 9 Oct. 1775.
[22] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 356-358, Howe to Germain, 22 Oct. 1777.
[23] The Sir Henry Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Vol. XXI, f. 26, memo of conversation with Sir William Howe, 6 Jul. 1777.
[24] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 111-114.
[25] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 1-34.

then their own performance would be brought into question.[26] The inquiry therefore went nowhere, as both sides effectively pulled their punches and waited for the whole thing to go away, which it did on 29 June, when Howe simply failed to turn up and proceedings were hastily closed with no resolution having been made.[27]

Through a combination of overzealousness (a series of pamphlets mocking his lack of results in America went too far in their criticisms, burying valid points under a mountain of bitter vitriol), disorganisation and simple lack of appetite for the fight, Howe's critics bungled their attempts to discredit him and, although he never quite cleared his name (he never commanded an army in battle again) he did hold several important posts and was to be commander of a British defence force, raised against a possible Spanish invasion in 1790. He achieved the rank of full general in 1793 and died in 1814, having produced no children despite his fondness for female company.[28]

Early works on the American War of Independence were patchy in quality. Much of the nineteenth-century literature has been dismissed as 'turgid and high flown,'[29] often more interested in demonising the tyrannical British and lionising Washington and his brave band of patriots than coming to any measured conclusions.[30] More considered appraisals of the conflict still found Howe to be a tricky subject, but a consensus arose that he was slow-moving and conventional,

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[26] J. Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of King George III,* Vol. IV, 1778-1779 (London: MacMillan and Co., 1928), p. 337, Lord North to the King, 10 May 1779. North commented how a favourable outcome for Howe would inevitably be viewed as being censorious of his administration; Ibid., p. 338, The King to Lord North, 10 May 1779. This letter showed the King's displeasure at a slip by Germain making it impossible to prevent Howe from calling witnesses at his inquiry and thus prolonging the affair.

[27] *The Parliamentary History of England From the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, Vol. XX, ed. William Cobbett (London: T.C. Hansard, 1814), pp. 139-141. *Ibid.* pp. 675-816.

[28] Partridge, *Sir Billy Howe*, pp. 245-246.

[29] D. Higginbotham, 'American Historians and the Military History of the American Revolution', *The American Historical Review*, 70 (1) (Oct., 1964), p. 22.

[30] For an example, see G. W. Cullum, 'The Struggle for the Hudson' in *Narrative and Critical History of America,* Vol. VI, Part I, ed. J. Winsor (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886).

rather than negligent and dull. Criticism tended to be mild or indirect. George Bancroft wrote of Howe's plans for Long Island: 'The plan of attack by General Howe was as elaborate as if he had had to encounter an equal army.'[31] With one of the strongest criticisms of Howe being that he repeatedly seemed pessimistic in his assessment of his army's chances against the Americans, this is a telling phrase.

The opinion of Charles Stedman (who served under Howe) is interesting. Stedman alluded to the possibility that Howe may have been reluctant to deal harshly with the Americans, considering their close ties to Britain.[32] Howe had served alongside colonial militia in the French and Indian War and it would be understandable had he felt some misgivings about commanding troops against the colonists. This idea was also touched upon by Sydney George Fisher in 1908, and would become the unifying theme of the two major attempts to examine Howe's generalship that appeared during the twentieth century.[33] Troyer Steele Anderson and Ira Gruber both argued that the Howe brothers had followed an ultimately doomed policy of alternating military action with attempts to broker a peaceful resolution to the conflict. In their dual capacities as peace commissioners and commanders of land and seas forces, they were each wearing two hats, although both Anderson and Gruber believed that Howe alternated hats with some skill and almost achieved the goal of an amicable reunion.[34]

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[31] G. Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent, Vol. IX* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1875), p. 87.
[32] C. Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War*, Vol. I (New York: Arno Press, 1969), pp. 198-199. Even though the value of Stedman's work was called into question by the issue of plagiarisation highlighted in R. K. Newmyer, 'Charles Stedman's History of the American War', The American Historical Review, 63 (4) (Jul., 1958), pp. 924-934, the idea of Howe not wishing to treat the Americans harshly is still worthy of consideration.
[33] Sydney George Fisher, *The Struggle for American Independence* (Philadelphia and London: Lippincott, 1908), p. 510.
[34] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*; Gruber, *Howe Brothers*.

Other important writers on the subject often appear to throw their hands up in despair of ever understanding Howe. When writing of his failure to exploit the victory on Long Island on 27 August 1776, Piers Mackesy declared it 'a puzzling episode, never satisfactorily explained'.[35] Sir John Fortescue, considering Howe's overall sluggishness of movement and repeated refusal to press home his advantage in the 1776 campaign, suggested that 'the only acceptable excuse for his inactivity was that the American army was likely to break up more rapidly if left to itself than if attacked,'[36] a conclusion that seems to have a little desperation about it.

The explanations for Howe's performance have been varied. Some have pointed to the traumatic experience of the assault on Breed's Hill as a key moment, one that reduced him to a shadow of his former self. C. F. Adams wrote in 1896 that 'Probably on the 27th of August, 1776, [Howe] remembered the 17th of June, 1775; and, a burnt child, he feared the fire'.[37] Maldwyn Jones believed that the battle deeply affected Howe and that he avoided frontal assaults whenever he could for the rest of his time in command.[38] Jeremy Black also cited Breed's Hill as the root cause of Howe's caution when the Americans were entrenched, but there was no hint of censure in this appraisal; Black acknowledged that the countryside in America was well-suited to the construction of defensive works and that British commanders had to decide how to deal with them. Black also recognised the fact that Howe's favoured

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[35] P. Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783*(London: University of Nebraska, 1993), p. 88.
[36] Sir J. Fortescue, *The War of Independence: The British Army in North America, 1775-1783* (London: Greenhill Books, 2001), p. 48.
[37] C.F. Adams, 'The Battle of Long Island', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 657;
[38] M. A. Jones, 'Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist', in *George Washington's Generals and Opponents: Their Exploits and Leadership*, ed. G.A. Billias (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), p. 47.

mode of proceeding was to outflank an opponent.[39] This was clearly demonstrated on Long Island, at White Plains and at the Brandywine (even the attack on Breed's Hill was actually an attempt to overpower one flank of the rebel position and then roll up the rest of the line), so rather than being cowed by experience it would appear that Howe was not a proponent of the frontal assault to begin with. Caution in the face of an entrenched enemy is, in any case, no sign of weakness and certainly does not deserve censure, and Howe demonstrated that his caution was not paralysing when he immediately called for an assault on the Dorchester Heights after the Americans took possession of it; only bad weather forced him to call the assault off.[40] Howe also showed a willingness, when outflanking was not an option, to attack extensive defensive works at Fort Washington the following year.

As well as attempting to explain his conduct as stemming from concern for the well-being of the men under his command, or a distaste for treating former friends too harshly, some historians have also simply written Howe off as a poor general. George Washington Cullum said of Howe that he was incompetent, lazy and ponderous.[41] Henry Belcher also delivered a stern verdict. Admitting that the Americans at Long Island had been thoroughly defeated, he went on to comment on the Howes' 'ruinous conduct of the immense interests entrusted to them' and wondered aloud if they were 'merely tools of the most factious of all oppositions'.[42] Henry Cabot Lodge simply

[39] Jeremy Black, *War for America: The Fight for Independence 1775–1783* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2001), pp. 71-72.
[40] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 87-92, Howe to Dartmouth, 21 Mar. 1776.
[41] Cullum, 'Struggle for the Hudson', p. 291.
[42] H. Belcher, *The First American Civil War: First Period, 1775-1778* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911), p. 161.

noted that during the 1776 campaign Howe had taken two months to advance 30 miles and commented, 'This in itself was defeat'.[43]

Aside from offering personal opinions based on the limited documents available for study, historians tended to largely skip over Howe's command. The contradictions of a general who never lost a battle during his two campaigns at the head of the British army and yet somehow contrived not to win the war were no doubt intriguing, but there were easier targets in the shape of Burgoyne and Cornwallis, who had the decency to write their failures in the bold type of decisive defeats, at Saratoga and Yorktown, respectively. With no answers to offer on the many puzzling elements of Howe's generalship, some no doubt turned sadly away, as Partridge suggested, while others could not resist acknowledging the mysteries they were unable to unravel. 'The British Commander's conduct,' wrote Belcher, 'is so unintelligible unless on grounds highly uncomplimentary to his loyalty, that fairy tales hang round his adventures.'[44]

The most vociferous criticism aimed at Howe came in the series of pamphlets that started during his period in command and continued through the Howe Inquiry and for a brief period afterwards. These pamphlets were sometimes replied to by Howe himself, resulting in a protracted and heated form of correspondence, in which *Letters to a Nobleman* drew the response *Observations upon a Pamphlet Entitled Letters to a Nobleman*, which in turn prompted *A Reply to the Observations of Lieut. Gen. Sir William Howe on a Pamphlet Entitled Letters to a Nobleman*.[45] The

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[43] H. C. Lodge, *The Story of the Revolution.* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), p. 201.
[44] Belcher, *The First American Civil War*, p. 164.
[45] J. Galloway, *Letters to a Nobleman*; W. Howe, *Observations Upon a Pamphlet Entitled, Letters to a Nobleman*, included in *Narrative*, pp. 37-110; J. Galloway, *A Reply to the Observations of Lieut. Gen. Sir William Howe on a Pamphlet Entitled Letters to a Nobleman* (London: G. Wilkie, 1780).

pamphlets often contained pertinent criticisms of Howe's conduct, but these were presented alongside more fanciful charges or simple errors of fact, which were often easy to dismiss, thus weakening the argument of the whole. In this manner, in *A Reply to the Observations*, Joseph Galloway asserted that Howe, 'contrary to the most urgent motives, to the plainest dictates of military science, and the explicit orders of his Sovereign, [led] his force 600 miles from the place where he was directed to join General Burgoyne'.[46] Howe had certainly invited criticism by unilaterally abandoning the Hudson strategy and this could have been a fruitful path for his critics to follow, but he was able to easily bat aside the notion that he had disobeyed explicit orders, from his sovereign or anybody else, because he had received nothing of the kind.

In a field, therefore, where few historians have felt confident enough to offer more than a passing opinion on Howe, the two works devoted to him and his brother demand serious consideration. Anderson developed the argument first proposed 28 years earlier by Fisher, noting the coincidences between the pauses in British military efforts in 1776 and the attempts at brokering a peaceful solution. It is clear that Anderson considered that the role of peace commissioners interfered with the purely military prosecution of the war, but he also painted Howe as a distinctly conventional eighteenth-century general. In other words, he was not incompetent, merely ordinary. He also claimed to have discerned fluctuating moods, evidenced in Howe's communications with Germain. Sometimes Howe appeared bullish and eager to proceed, at other times timid and full of concerns. This (according to Anderson) impacted on Howe's ability to command, and Anderson went on to claim that Howe's slow movements during the latter part of the 1776 campaign stemmed from his belief that a decisive victory was now impossible. Perhaps surprisingly, Anderson did not

[46] Galloway, *Reply to the Observations*, p. 4.

put this forward as a criticism of Howe's generalship, but merely as an observation.[47] Elements of Anderson's argument were picked up by Gruber, first in a journal article in 1965 and later in a full-blown book on the Howes' conduct of the war, in 1972.[48] (Gruber's conclusions were later condensed into an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.)[49] Starting from the premise that it was Admiral Howe who was most inclined to pursue a peaceful solution to the rebellion, and that this intruded upon General Howe's conduct of his military strategy, Gruber carried the thesis to its ultimate conclusion. The concept of Howe's mediocrity was replaced by an even more thorough analysis of the impediments raised by the attempts to make peace at the same time as war. Gruber claimed that Howe had made a conscious decision to wage a campaign for territory, manoeuvring the Americans out of New York in a display of irresistible military power that would open the door for successful peace negotiations. In Gruber's thesis, Howe had no intention of seeking a decisive victory and would even spurn the chance if it presented itself. Gruber admitted that he could not claim to know why Howe chose this course, having initially favoured the idea of a decisive battle (although he suggests that his elder brother must have been influential), but events tend to fit in with Gruber's theory and his work has the tantalising allure of an explanation that seems to answer every question at every stage of the campaign.[50]

Gruber's theory does not, however, take account of the fact that if indeed the Howes were combining mild military pressure with an open-door policy on peace

[47] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, pp. 137-142.
[48] I. D. Gruber, 'Lord Howe and George Germain, British Politics and the Winning of American Independence', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 225–243; Gruber, *Howe Brothers*.
[49] I. D. Gruber, 'William Howe, fifth Viscount Howe (1729–1814)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [Online]. Available: www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13966. Accessed 15 Oct. 2013.
[50] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, pp. 105-106.

negotiations, it should have been obvious that it was failing. The peace negotiations attempted, chiefly by Lord Howe, never showed any inclination to bear fruit. They foundered on matters of basic protocol (the rejection of a letter to 'George Washington, Esquire, etc. etc.', rather than to 'General George Washington', was just one way in which the Americans showed repeatedly that they were not willing to negotiate)[51] and on substance; the fact that the Howes were empowered only to accept the Americans' apologies and return to loyalty, and not to address any of their grievances, meant that there really was nothing to talk about when negotiators finally did get together. Thus, this persuasive argument, which developed steadily throughout the last century, cannot claim to have explained Sir William's actions entirely.

Apparently, contemporary historians were not convinced either, as many works demonstrated. Sir John Fortescue acknowledged the idea that, on Long Island, Howe may have been treating the rebels gently out of hopes for a peaceful settlement, but he finally accepted Howe's own excuse that the strength of the American lines at Brooklyn were too great to allow him to storm them.[52] Fortescue did, it must be said, appear to be somewhat confused over the disposition of the American defences, but this is hardly to be wondered at if he was taking Howe's own imprecise evidence at the inquiry as his main source of information. On the taking of Fort Washington, Fortescue commented that it was 'a pretty little action, neatly designed and very neatly executed; for Howe at his best was no contemptible commander'.[53] Fortescue's conclusion was that Howe had been let down by the politicians at home, who failed to provide the necessary forces in time for Howe and Carleton to wield them effectively.

[51] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 336, Howe to Germain, 6 Aug. 1776; Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 94.
[52] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, p. 38.
[53] Ibid., p. 46.

(In relation to this it is interesting to note that Howe himself had expressed his 'utter amazement'[54] at the efforts of Germain in raising the army for the 1776 campaign.)

Black championed a persuasive argument – the idea that Howe may have been fighting an unwinnable war. In Black's opinion, decisive battles were hard to come by in the eighteenth century, and the failure to achieve one might often be due to an opponent being unwilling to stand and fight.[55] Tactics in both land and naval confrontations tended to be rigid and formalised and equally matched armies would often result in inconclusive battles. Black considered the fact that the major powers of the world were so closely matched (in terms of military technology, tactics and organisational abilities) to be a key factor in the difficulty of achieving overwhelming successes on the battlefields of the eighteenth century.[56] He noted that American forces attempted to fight a conventional war (they built fortifications and stood in line to fight) and he asserted that Washington was actually attempting to build an *ancien régime* army.[57] The problem was that their organisational abilities and tactical awareness lagged far behind those of the British and Hessian forces, especially in the early months of the conflict. Black went on to suggest that revolutionary warfare allowed for decisive battles when relatively unsophisticated, unprofessional forces came up against regulars, such as at Culloden in 1746.[58] In Black's opinion, this may have been the case in the colonies as well, had the terrain been more suitable to the pursuit of a defeated foe, and if Howe's army had been blessed with a stronger cavalry contingent (the area around New York was heavily wooded and criss-crossed

[54] (TNA), PRO, 5/93, ff. 212-213, Howe to Germain, Jun. 8, 1776.
[55] J. Black, 'Eighteenth-Century Warfare Reconsidered', *War in History*, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 219-224.
[56] Ibid., p. 219.
[57] Black, *War for America*, p.17.
[58] Black, 'Eighteenth-Century Warfare Reconsidered', p. 224.

with stone walls, making it unsuitable for cavalry – and Howe had less than 1,000 light dragoons at his disposal).[59]

It is therefore important to consider Howe's performance in the context of eighteenth-century warfare. Maldwyn Jones's essay on Howe is revealingly entitled 'Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist'. Jones saw Howe as acting within 'the limitations imposed by his military education'.[60] He may not have been a military genius, able to see through the problems to a decisive strategy, but he was also far from incompetent. In his introduction to that volume, George Billias concurred, stating that all the British generals in America (not just Howe) 'tended to… cling too closely to the military orthodoxies of the day'.[61] Gruber added his weight to this idea in 1974, pointing out that there was little enthusiasm for strategy in the British armed forces of the time and seeing an emphasis on tactics in the courses of the Woolwich and Portsmouth academies. 'What interested English officers most,' Gruber contended, 'were the skills required for managing ships and men in the face of the enemy'.[62] Indirect support for this 'unwinnable war' idea comes in the theory that the American War of Independence was Britain's Vietnam. James W. Pohl addressed the military similarities between the two conflicts and although these appear, upon deeper inspection, to be largely superficial, the very fact that these wars have been compared is interesting. Vietnam has become a byword for military futility, so by association the War of Independence is painted as an uprising the British were ill-equipped to quell, if, indeed, anybody could have quelled it. Vietnam, while perhaps not a perfect

[59] Black, *War for America*, pp.72–73.
[60] Jones, 'Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist', p. 49.
[61] G.A Billias, ed., *George Washington's Generals and Opponents: Their Exploits and Leadership*, pp. xix–xx.
[62] I. D. Gruber, 'The Origins of British Strategy in the War for American Independence', in *Military History of the American Revolution: the proceedings of the 6th Military History Symposium, United States Air Force Academy, 10–11 October 1974*, ed. S.J. Underdal (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1976), pp. 38-40.

analogy for the War of Independence, did provide an important impetus to the re-evaluation of revolutionary warfare and this, together with the twentieth-century move towards professional historians identified by Don Higginbotham, resulted in a rather more robust approach to military history.[63]

By the current century, historians were ready to reconsider events, with the result that Howe has been at least partially exonerated and even fulsomely praised in several recent works, most notably by Hugh Bicheno and Stanley Weintraub. Bicheno referred to a 'very nearly successful strategy of alternating sharp military action with political concessions'[64] and praised the Howes for attempting to win the war without creating a lasting resentment in the colonies. Bicheno also supported Howe's decision to restrain his men at Long Island, claiming that an attack on the American lines might have failed and would certainly have resulted in many casualties, although with the confusion over the strength of those lines it is hard to be sure of this. Bicheno's conclusion was that Howe was attempting to create an aura of invincibility by demonstrating that he could go wherever he pleased, whenever he pleased.[65] Bicheno's ideas are fresh and compelling, and they take the unusual tack of focussing on how close Howe came to ending the revolutionary war effort in one campaign, rather than merely considering how he eventually failed. Weintraub, writing two years after Bicheno, took a similar approach, praising Howe for his performance in occupying New York, but adding that he was unable to exploit his victories to the

[63] J.W. Pohl, 'The American Revolution and the Vietnamese War: Pertinent Military Analogies', *The History Teacher*, 7 (1974), pp. 255-265. Edward M. Coffman, 'The New American Military History', *Military Affairs*, 48 (1984), p. 2. Don Higginbotham, 'American Historians and the Military History of the American Revolution', *The American Historical Review*, 70 (1964), p. 24.
[64] H. Bicheno, *Rebels and Redcoats* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), p.xxxi.
[65] Bicheno, *Rebels and Redcoats*, p. 46, p. 56-57, pp. 70-71;

full.[66] Weintraub, perhaps thinking that everything had already been said about Long Island, limited himself to a two-sentence description of the battle: 'Sullivan fortified the Jamaica Road approaches on Long Island with all of five militiamen. Howe sent 10,000 redcoats.'[67] This succinct account is a reminder that hindsight can be unforgiving and that at many times during the 1776 campaign it appeared as if Howe was leading his army to a comprehensive and easy victory over a disastrously outclassed opponent.

Acting as a counterpoint to these two accounts is that of Barnet Schecter, whose hostility towards the British is evident throughout his study of the war. Choosing to concentrate on New York, which Schecter maintained was the keystone of the revolution during the war, he delivered a blow-by-blow account of the Battle of Long Island, noting the controversy surrounding Howe's decision not to press his advantage but offering the explanation that he was merely trying to limit his casualties. Schecter also offered the familiar Bunker Hill reasoning, claiming that, 'Politically, and perhaps personally, he couldn't bear a repeat of Bunker Hill,'[68] but this sits uneasily with his insistence that the British had been arrogant and over-confident. Howe was portrayed as competent, if a little slow-moving, and Schecter made no bold statements on either Howe's quality, or that of Washington, although he wrote of Washington's many questionable decisions in the campaign without censure. Mark Urban added an unexpected theory to the mix by claiming that it was a fundamental weakness in the British Army itself that led to defeat.[69] In Urban's thesis, the War of Independence served as a training ground that enabled the army to

[66] S. Weintraub, *Iron Tears: Rebellion in America, 1775-1783* (London, Simon & Schuster 2005), p. 77
[67] Ibid., p. 72.
[68] B. Schecter, *The Battle for New York* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), p. 148.
[69] M. Urban, *Fusiliers: How the British Army Lost America, but Learned to Fight* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).

improve – too late to secure the colonies, but in time to take on the French successfully a decade or so later. This thesis is undermined by the fact that Howe's men were victorious on almost every occasion they went into battle against the Americans; the war was not lost because the British army was not up to the job. A recent analysis of the strategies employed in the war saw Black pointing out the differences between a war of conquest and one of pacification and outlining the two options open to the British – destroying the American army or taking key strategic points. Black concluded that 'the British emphasis possibly should have been destroying the Continental Army,' but he also went on to praise 'one of the most impressive and complex joint military operations in history against New York City and its environs'.[70]

Clearly, Howe is able to be interpreted in many different ways. This thesis will attempt to come to a clearer understanding of the factors that shaped his decisions in America. There are four areas that merit in-depth analysis: Howe's relationship with his subordinate officers; the quality and composition of the army he commanded; his relationship with his political superiors; and his personal qualities and attitudes to his command. The first chapter of this thesis will concentrate on Howe's working relationship with his second-in-command, Clinton, and the commander of the Hessian contingent of his army, Lieutenant-General Leopold Philip von Heister. These are the men with whom Howe had to deal when planning operations and implementing those plans. The second chapter will deal with the quality and composition of Howe's army, considering if it was fit for the purpose of quelling a rebellion 3,000 miles from home. The third chapter will concentrate on Howe's interaction with Lord George Germain,

[70] J. Black, 'British Military Strategy' in *Strategy in the American War of Independence: A Global Approach*, ed. Donald Stoker, Kenneth J. Hagan and Michael T. McMaster (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 58-61.

who ran the war as the American Secretary; confidence in that relationship would be critical if both men were to act effectively. The fourth chapter, an attempt to come to a fuller understanding of Howe's personal qualities and attitudes to the war, is hampered by the lack of personal documents, but although Howe did not write freely, it is often possible to discern quite subtle shifts of attitude in his correspondence. Most important in this section will be a close perusal of the draft of his narrative. In seeing where Howe changed his arguments it is possible to see where he thought his conduct was most vulnerable to attack. It is also reasonable to assume that a draft would be more open and revealing than the final (polished and revised) speech as delivered to the House. A draft is not intended for public consumption and in many cases the changing of a single word can be highly illuminating.

By assessing both old and new primary sources, it will be demonstrated that Howe started the campaign of 1776 with hopes of a successful prosecution of the war, but that his confidence was first undermined by a lack of support from his subordinate officers and then a loss of confidence in his political superiors. Howe's loss of confidence was shockingly sudden (it can clearly be seen to materialise through two letters to Germain), the reaction of a man who could see where his problems lay, but was not blessed with the abilities to solve them. Howe was straightforward and impatient of intrigue and flattery, making him ill-equipped to indulge in the sort of political in-fighting necessary to put his command on a more secure footing. His political maladroitness was highlighted by his narrative, which, revised though it may have been, was painfully inadequate to the task of clearing his name. Overall, this

thesis will offer a more rounded assessment of Howe as a commanding officer than has ever been produced before. [71]

[71] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 21-23, Howe to Germain, 20 Dec, 1776, and ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 April, 1777.

I

William Howe's relationship with Henry Clinton

Howe's working relationship with his fellow officers impacted significantly on his ability to perform as commander-in-chief. His second-in-command, Major General Henry Clinton, filled an especially important role, as he acted as a sounding board for Howe's ideas, offered ideas of his own and often commanded an important corps of the army during operations. It was important that Howe trusted his key subordinate, yet he was unable to. Tracking of their interactions reveals that, following a brief period of harmony, the two drew apart, first due to fundamental differences of opinion on the running of the war and subsequently due to a personal falling out that had more to do with Clinton's sensitivity than actual events. Worse than this, Clinton began to undermine his commanding officer, subtly at first, but with increasing openness, until he finally displayed utter contempt for him, declaring that he would rather desert than continue to serve under him.[1]

The key evidence for the Howe-Clinton relationship comes from Clinton's own notes on meetings between the two men, which raises the question of Clinton's reliability. Crucially, although Clinton proved that he was able to distort facts to suit his ends in letters to friends, colleagues and family, his personal memoranda of private conversations seem to have been straightforward and without agenda. He did not criticise Howe in these notes, sticking to a detailed and often revealing statement of the topics discussed during each meeting. In fact, Clinton often emerged in a poor light, while Howe was depicted in broadly sympathetic terms. Had Clinton intended these memoranda to be read by the public he may well have coloured them more with

[1] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXIX, f. 2, Clinton to the Duke of Newcastle, 19 Dec. 1777.

his personal opinions, but he seems to have been interested only in making a reliable record of what passed between the two men for his future reference.

Relationships between fellow officers were far more complicated than those between an officer and the rank and file, not because the officer class was intrinsically more complex than the common soldier, but because they had far more liberty to express any dissatisfaction. Officers were influenced by the driving forces of ambition and honour, and there was also the tricky element of patronage, which could lead to cliques and factions forming, sometimes to the detriment of the service. Eighteenth-century officers also felt perfectly justified in putting their own interests before that of the army. Loftus Cliffe, an officer in the 46th Regiment who fought under Howe in the 1776 and 1777 campaigns, was able to write after the capture of Philadelphia that 'if I do not succeed in my prospect of promotion during the course of [the next campaign] I shall sincerely wish myself out of it'.[2] In his own retrospective of his campaigns in the war, Clinton was able to write without self-consciousness of his disappointment, in 1777, of having no opportunity to advance his personal 'fame'.[3]

Officers felt that it was their right to be given the chance to distinguish themselves and saw no contradiction in threatening to return home if they felt this right was being withheld, or if they felt their commanding officer was being unduly critical of them. Notorious in this respect is the spat between Howe and Major General Hugh Percy at the beginning of 1777. Percy felt so personally affronted by perceived criticism in a letter from Howe that he declared he was unwilling to continue to serve in America. 'In short,' he wrote to Henry Clinton, 'I am so hurt that nothing on earth shall make me stay here… I had rather quit the service entirely than

[2] WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers, Loftus Cliffe to Bartholomew Cliffe, 20 Jan. 1778.
[3] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 65.

remain here any longer.' Percy was deadly serious; he returned home to England and did not serve again in the war.[4]

Heightened sensitivity to personal slights, on what might be considered the flimsiest of grounds, also manifested itself in the behaviour of Burgoyne. Scheduled to travel to Canada from England on the *Apollo* in March 1777, Burgoyne found he had been redirected to sail on the *Ariadne*. For two reasons (the fact that he wanted to sail with his friend, Philemon Pownall, the captain of the *Apollo*, and the fact that the *Ariadne* was smaller than the original ship and therefore amounted to a demotion of sorts) this was unacceptable to Burgoyne, who raged that the decision was borne of 'caprice, ill harmony and stupidity'.[5] Burgoyne went on to claim to Captain Pownall that 'I really feel myself offended and shall make my complaint to the King'.[6] Burgoyne personally wrote to Lord Sandwich, the First Lord of the Admiralty, to get the change reversed, referring to it as 'so marked a slight'.[7]

These examples serve to illustrate that the eighteenth-century British officer was very different from his modern counterparts. Friction between officers was therefore inevitable and commonplace and Howe would certainly have experienced it before. What made the relationship with Clinton so destructive was the way in which his second-in-command constantly disagreed with him and brooded over perceived injustices long after he had received explanations and apologies.

Howe, Clinton and Burgoyne had travelled to Boston together on the *Cerberus* (arriving in May 1775) to add extra impetus to the British military response to

[4] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XX, f. 32, Percy to Clinton, 20 Feb. 1777
[5] Ibid., f. 40, Burgoyne to Philemon Pownall, 20 Mar. 1777.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., f. 41, Burgoyne to the Earl of Sandwich, 20 Mar. 1777.

growing tensions in the colonies.[8] Howe, as the senior officer among the three, would have been the obvious choice to take over from Thomas Gage should he be relieved of his command. Although Burgoyne would take a far more prominent position than Clinton in the campaigns to follow, he was destined to be removed from Howe, commanding the army that attempted to push through northern New York state in 1777.[9]

Clinton had a much closer relationship with the British commander, but before getting into the specific details of this relationship, it is worth noting the peculiarities of Clinton's character, peculiarities that would make it all but impossible for Howe (or, indeed, almost anybody else) to work harmoniously with him. Clinton's personality was so fascinating, a psychological profile has been written of him.[10] Frederick Wyatt and William B. Willcox argued that it was his 'unconscious conflict over authority'[11] that was the root of his prickly personality. It is true that Clinton displayed markedly different character traits when advising a superior compared to when he was in command. In their paper, Wyatt and Willcox argued that this might have stemmed from an unusually complex relationship with his father; Clinton both craved power and, at the same time, felt that he was undeserving of it, apparently a classic character trait of those who are in awe of their parents and feel unworthy to assume authority from them. Although fascinating, the thesis is flawed in assuming all other factors influencing Clinton's behaviour remained constant. In fact, Clinton's lack of aggression when in a position of command can be attributed to the considerably smaller forces he generally had to work with. When championing bold

[8] Willcox, *Portrait of a General*, p. 45.
[9] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, p. 7; Partridge, *Sir Billy Howe*, p. 2.
[10] F. Wyatt and W. B. Willcox, 'Henry Clinton: A Psychological Exploration in History', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 16 (1) (Jan., 1959), pp. 3-26.
[11] Ibid., p. 17.

and aggressive movements to Howe in 1776 and 1777, for instance, he was planning for an army of 20,000 men or more. When in command of a detached force at New York in 1777, he commanded around 7,000 and was limited to what he called a 'starved'[12] defensive.[13]

Clinton's behaviour is more easily explained by considering the single most important facet of his character, that which overrode all others – his hypersensitivity. Even in an age where personal honour was a delicate matter, Clinton took the concept to extreme lengths. Coupled with an absolute refusal to let a perceived slight drop, even if a full apology had been extracted, this made Clinton extremely difficult to deal with. Clinton's falling out with Sir Peter Parker, the naval commander who worked alongside him during a botched combined operation against Sullivan's Island in 1776, is a prime example of Clinton's relentless approach.[14] Although Clinton and Parker shared the blame fairly equally for a poorly planned and executed expedition, Clinton attempted to absolve himself completely at Parker's expense and besieged the unfortunate man with demands for redress, both in person and via letters, until Parker responded that the matter 'had best be consigned to oblivion'.[15] Clinton also corresponded freely with friends on the matter, frequently repeating himself and seemingly seeking only to vent his anger and justify his own conduct; he neither asked for, nor appeared interested in, the opinions of his correspondents.[16]

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[12] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 63.
[13] Ibid., p. 62; Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 137. The exact number of troops at Clinton's command was near 8,500, but he had had just 6,900 present and fit for duty.
[14] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 50, Memo of conversation between Clinton and Sir Peter Parker, undated; Ibid., Vol. XIX, f. 10, Memo of meeting with Sir Peter Parker, undated.
[15] Ibid., Vol. XX, f. 6, Sir Peter Parker to Clinton, 4 Jan. 1777.
[16] Ibid., Vol. XVIII, f. 55, Clinton to Edward Harvey, 20 Nov. 1776; Ibid., Vol. XIX, f. 27, Sir John Vaughn to Clinton, 31 Dec. 1776; Ibid., Vol. XVIII, f. 55, Clinton to Edward Harvey, 20 Nov. 1776; Ibid., Vol. XIX, f. 27, Sir John Vaughn to Clinton, 31 Dec. 1776.

Howe and Clinton actually got off to a good start in the colonies; in a personal letter, Clinton wrote of Howe and Burgoyne that 'I could not have named two people I should sooner wish to serve with in every respect.'[17] The letter continued with what could be viewed as an ominous cloud on the horizon, admitting that the three men differed in opinions, but this letter removes any possibility of there having been a history of disagreement between the men. Memoranda of conversations between Howe and Clinton during their time together in Boston suggest they were exchanging ideas freely and without rancour. Although they often disagreed on potential plans, they seemed to share the idea that something needed to be attempted to break the monotony of the rebel siege of Boston. Both men also lamented their lack of manpower. Howe, for instance, suggested a diversionary action towards the town of Mystick, while Clinton did not believe they had sufficient men to detach a corps for that purpose and suggested instead the taking of Mount Prospect, which Howe did not feel would be of any use if taken.[18] There is also evidence that the two men shared a dissatisfaction with Gage, which may have acted as a unifying force until his removal. When Clinton suggested an expedition to Newberry, only to be told by Gage that he could not spare the 1,000 men necessary, Howe agreed that the proposed move would be a good idea and that Gage could easily spare the men.[19]

Warning signs were, however, already apparent, and not just in the simple fact that the two men almost always disagreed with each other. Howe and Clinton had taken prominent parts in the assault on Breed's Hill (popularly known as the Battle of Bunker Hill) on 17 June 1775, and although both had emerged with credit, Howe was to receive a foretaste of the doggedness of Clinton's sensitivity in the aftermath of the

[17] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. X, f. 4, Clinton to P [possibly William Phillips], 13 Jun. 1775.
[18] Ibid., Vol. X, f. 35, Memo of conversation with Howe, 19 Aug. 1775.
[19] Ibid., Vol. XI, f. 3, Memo of conversation with Howe, 4 Sep. 1775.

battle. Clinton was originally intended to have taken no part in the assault, but, seeing the difficulties the British soldiers were in as the attack foundered, he crossed the Charles River to help.[20] Clinton was concerned that his actions, which exceeded his orders, might be viewed unfavourably, but he was also in no doubt that he had performed well and deserved credit, which put him in an awkward situation. Clinton took care to create the appearance of being uninterested in personal credit or glory, while actually being extremely vigilant on that point. Thus, when Howe mentioned Clinton's service in his report, referring to the 'laudable proceeding of Major General Clinton,'[21] Clinton wrote to a friend that 'My friend Howe in his thanks does me too much honour in mentioning my little services'.[22]

When, several months later, Clinton became aware that Gage had failed to give these 'little services' full credit in his official report, he was furious. An angry letter to Gage described how Clinton was dissatisfied with the account, believing that it gave the impression that he had merely followed reinforcements over to Charlestown when he should have led them.[23] Clinton also took the matter up with Howe, quizzing him on what he had written in his report. This reaction seems all the more curious considering he had been mentioned as deserving of special thanks in a message from the King, received by the troops at Boston in September;[24] Clinton must have been aware that his actions had not gone unnoticed. Howe reassured the irate general that

[20] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 19.
[21] WCL, Gage Papers, Vol. XXX, Report of Bunker Hill by Howe, 21 Jun. 1775.
[22] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. X, f. 7, Draft of letter from Clinton to General Carpenter, undated.
[23] Ibid., Vol. XI, f. 29, Clinton to Gage, 9 Oct. 1775.
[24] B.F. Stevens, ed., *General Sir William Howe's Orderly Book, 1775-1776* (London: B.F. Stevens and Brown, 1890), 27 Sep. 1775, p. 98.

proper credit had been given in his own report, even quoting the relevant passage, which appears to have satisfied Clinton as to Howe's part in the affair.[25]

Gage was another matter entirely. Clinton took the matter up with the man who was still commander-in-chief in the colonies, but received a firm rebuttal, which served to highlight one of the problems that could be raised by Clinton's peculiar sense of justice. Gage defended his report of the action robustly and logically, explaining that he had asked for Clinton's assessment of the battle, to be told that he (Clinton) could claim no credit; '… you would say nothing of it,' wrote Gage, 'further than you could not help going over, but had no merit in it, for that the affair was over'. Gage then took this to its logical conclusion: 'I could not mention what I did not know.'[26]

Clinton had overplayed the role of the noble officer who is too modest to put himself forward for special notice, but despite Gage's strong defence, and the fact he went on in his letter to express his concern at having caused Clinton distress, this was not the sort of matter that Clinton would or could forget. The strongly disapproving manner in which he wrote of Bunker Hill after his falling out with Gage suggests his contempt for the man. 'We are an army of children and our officers have customs I highly disapprove,'[27] he wrote. This could also be read as disapproving of Howe, who had led the attack even though he was operating under Gage's orders. Perhaps aware of how strong these words were, this letter required reading through an hourglass mask (a sheet of paper with an hourglass-shaped section cut out, which would conceal part of a letter and allow a hidden message to be conveyed) for the real content to be

[25] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XI, f. 20, Howe to Clinton, 1 Oct. 1775.
[26] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XI, f. 30, Gage to Clinton, 10 Oct. 1775.
[27] Ibid., Vol. XII, f. 22, Clinton to William Phillips, before 5 Dec. 1775.

revealed, but whether or not any criticism of Howe was intended, friction was developing in their relationship.

Clinton's contemptuous assessment of the assault on Breed's Hill underlined a key difference of opinion between the two men, which quickly drove them apart and fatally undermined their working relationship: they disagreed on almost every detail of how the war should be fought. Clinton believed that seaborne raids were the best way to bring the colonies to their senses; it was the sort of war that would cause them the most distress and, given the vulnerable nature of their extensive coastline, a natural step to take, in his opinion. Clinton believed this made more sense than attempting to operate with a large army on the mainland, where support from loyalists would be doubtful (he actually wrote to General Harvey and the Duke of Newcastle that they had no support whatsoever in America, obviously an exaggeration, but indicative of the lack of faith he had in raising significant loyalist forces).[28] To Major General William Phillips, Clinton wrote that the Royal Navy was the best instrument for bringing the colonies to heel.[29]

Howe was fundamentally opposed to such a method of warfare, as borne out by his reaction to the punitive raid on the Massachusetts town of Falmouth on 18 October 1775, in which around 400 buildings were destroyed by a combination of incendiary fire from Royal Navy ships and fires set by landing parties.[30] Howe was concerned that the British public might believe he was responsible for the raid, even though it had been authorised before he took command of the army. Clinton's willingness to set fire to Charlestown during the Battle of Bunker Hill proved he had

[28] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 8, Clinton to General Harvey and the Duke of Newcastle (draft), 15 Nov. 1775.
[29] Ibid., Clinton to William Phillips, f. 22, before 5 Dec. 1775.
[30] MHS, Dispatch from Lt. Henry Mowat to Vice Admiral Graves about the destruction of Falmouth (Portland).

no such qualms about treating the colonists roughly, and he reassured his commanding officer during a conversation in December that the decision to burn Falmouth had been the right one and should have been taken earlier.[31]

There was also fundamental disagreement on the keystone of the British efforts at ending the rebellion – the Hudson strategy. This aimed at dividing the colonies by the cooperation of two sizeable British armies, one moving down the Hudson river from Canada and one moving up it from New York City. Clinton wholeheartedly believed in this strategy, but Howe did not. While still in England, Clinton had sketched out his thoughts, noting the importance of New York.[32] By June 1775 he was writing to General Harvey that New York was the place to begin the next campaign, and he reiterated the sentiment in November, claiming that taking possession of New York would 'awe the southern provinces'.[33]

More revealing than this is a conversation between Howe and Clinton on 3 December 1775. Discussing the possible fall of Quebec, Howe stated that it would be best in that scenario for the British to concentrate everything on New York. This would obviously be a clear departure from the Hudson strategy; a large rebel force in Canada would mean that the British could not have complete control over the Hudson. Clinton insisted that Quebec would have to be retaken if it fell, so that two British armies could operate along the Hudson and break the colonies' communications with each other. Howe in turn claimed that even complete mastery of the Hudson would not totally end interaction between the colonies, as they would

[31] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 32, Memo of conversation with Sir W. H. relative to the Southern Expedition, Dec. 1775.
[32] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. IX, f. 55, Plan made in England, 1775;
[33] Ibid., Vol. X, f. 11, Clinton to General Harvey, Jun. 1775; Ibid., Vol. XII, f. 8, Clinton to Harvey and Newcastle, 15 Nov. 1775.

have Indian allies on the Lakes to facilitate communication.[34] Howe, therefore, showed that from the very start he had serious misgivings about the Hudson strategy and doubted that it could deliver the results for which it was designed. While still at Boston, Clinton further demonstrated his support of the strategy, outlining a plan for seizing the rebel fortifications in the Hudson Highlands as soon as their construction had been completed. The plan was sound, and anticipated by almost two years the actual taking of the forts, by Clinton, in October 1777.[35]

Disagreement over the desirability and efficacy of punitive warfare would drive the first wedge between Howe and Clinton and disagreement over the Hudson strategy would finish the job of alienating the generals over the course of the next two years. These differences of opinion need not have been disastrous (it is perfectly possible for two officers to work effectively together while holding differing views on the way a war should be conducted), but these differences of opinion provided fertile ground for Clinton's hypersensitivity, until simple disagreement was transformed into open hostility and a desire to undermine Howe.

Clinton's experiences while on the detached command that attacked Sullivan's Island provided the first serious stress point in the Howe-Clinton relationship. Originally proposed in October 1775, the expedition was intended to support an uprising of loyalists in North Carolina, but due to a number of factors it became symbolic of the logistical nightmare that faced British commanders in the colonies.[36] Although intended as a means of carrying the war to the rebellious colonies swiftly, and before the main British army was built up for an offensive campaign the following year, planning and implementation were beset by so many problems that

[34] Ibid., Vol. XII, f. 19, Memo of conversation with Howe, 3 Dec. 1775.
[35] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XIII, f. 29, Plan for attacking the Hudson Highlands, 1 Feb. 1776.
[36] (TNA) PRO 5/92, ff. 270-277, Dartmouth to Howe, 22 Oct. 1775.

nothing was actually attempted until late June 1776, four months after the loyalists of North Carolina had risen up (expecting support) and been decisively defeated.[37]

In December 1775, Clinton grumbled to Howe that his orders from Germain regarding the expedition were not clear enough, believing that they suggested much, but actually ordered nothing.[38] Howe would later refer to such 'whispers across the Atlantic'[39] in his own defence and Clinton obviously felt vulnerable as plans for the expedition took shape. As time dragged on, however, it became clear that the original intention of the expedition was no longer a viable option, but as Clinton found himself detached from Howe, with a combined force at his disposal, he was tempted to mount a seaborne raid and the focus of the expedition switched to Charleston, South Carolina. The steady disintegration of the expedition is not relevant here, but the fact that Clinton felt such a compulsion to press on, when it had clearly foundered, is important. Aware that his commander-in-chief did not share his enthusiasm for such seaborne raids, it is reasonable to propose that Clinton wanted to demonstrate the soundness of the principle, and vindicate his faith in the method. He could not accept a meek failure to attack in the very mode he personally championed; pride was a factor here and, as so often in the career of Clinton, this personal failing would be warped to transfer blame onto others, with Howe himself being caught in the backlash.[40]

Gruber contended that it was Howe's falling out with Percy, which took place at the beginning of 1777, that caused Clinton to lose confidence in Howe, but the

[37] E. Robson, 'The Expedition to the Southern Colonies, 1775–1776', *The English Historical Review*, 66 (261) (Oct., 1951), p. 535.
[38] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 32, Memo of conversation with Howe relative to the Southern Expedition, Dec 1775.
[39] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 9.
[40] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 8, Clinton to General Harvey and the Duke of Newcastle (draft), 15 Nov. 1775; Ibid., f. 22, Clinton to William Phillips, before 5 Dec. 1775.

process started much earlier and was actually almost complete before the Percy affair even started.[41] It was Clinton's sensitivity over the southern expedition that started the process. More specifically, it was to do with the amount of time Clinton wasted on the expedition while Howe was awaiting reinforcements at New York. The difficult nature of eighteenth-century communications came into play here. On 18 May, Clinton had written to Howe complaining that it had been three months since he had last heard from him, leaving him ignorant of Howe's plans for the coming campaign.[42] Shortly after writing this letter, Clinton received one from Howe, written on 12 April, stating that no firm operational plans had yet been made.[43] Clinton took this as a justification for remaining in the south. As late as 15 June he wrote to an unknown correspondent, claiming that he was 'totally at liberty for a few days at least,'[44] given his lack of orders from Howe. Clinton may have had a technical point here. He had not yet received explicit orders to return to New York or Halifax, but he would have been aware that the campaigning season was progressing and that the main push was to be made at New York. To his unknown correspondent, Clinton admitted that Sullivan's Island tempted him and he offered further justification, claiming that he would not know where to find Howe even if he did return north.[45]

Clinton should have been more aware of the length of time it took for correspondence to reach its destination. When writing on 15 June he knew that it was more than two months since Howe had informed him that no firm operational plans had yet been made; it does not seem reasonable for Clinton to have assumed that this was still the case and the possibility presents itself that Clinton may have simply been

[41] Gruber, *The Howe Brothers*, p. 192.
[42] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XV, f. 49, Clinton to Howe, 18 May 1776.
[43] Ibid., f. 10, Howe to Clinton, 12 Apr. 1776.
[44] Ibid., Vol. XVI, f. 47, Clinton to unknown, 15 Jun. 1776.
[45] Ibid.

hiding behind a lack of written orders to justify his actions.[46] As it happened, circumstances to the north had changed. On 22 May Howe had written another letter of a completely different tone and had asked Clinton to return to New York as quickly as possible, giving him the option of leaving one or two regiments in the south only if Clinton thought they might serve some 'essential purposes'.[47] Howe had also explained that some earlier correspondence from him (regarding the evacuation of Boston) had been lost when the ship carrying them, the *Glasgow*, had encountered a rebel squadron.

All might have ended well had the attack on Sullivan's Island gone smoothly and swiftly. It did neither and Clinton soon revealed anxiety over his tardiness in returning with his men to New York. Writing to Brigadier General Sir John Vaughn on Long Island, on 18 June, Clinton was suddenly bursting with impatience to be heading north. The rising tension, and the fact that he could see where he may have left himself open to criticism, was revealed in a very telling sentence. 'Time is precious,' he wrote. 'I heartily wish our business was done, and we were on our way to the north.'[48] This abrupt change of tone from Clinton could be due to misgivings over the operation against Sullivan's Island, but it is also reasonable to suggest that Howe's letter of 22 May might have recently arrived and dramatically changed the situation. Clinton, in that case, would suddenly have been aware that he had actually been ordered back to New York almost a month before, which would certainly explain his sudden anxiety.[49]

The attack on Sullivan's Island dragged on and Clinton was not ready to leave for New York until the middle of July, by which time he was simultaneously

[46] Ibid.
[47] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVI, f. 1, Howe to Clinton, 22 May 1776.
[48] Ibid., f. 51, Clinton to John Vaughn, 18 Jun. 1776.
[49] Ibid., f. 1, Howe to Clinton, 22 May 1776.

attempting to justify his decision to press the assault and fretting over his inability to extricate himself from the mess and head to New York. To Germain, on 8 July, he again claimed that it was Howe's lack of explicitness in his orders that had influenced his decision, and that by suggesting Clinton was free to act as he saw fit, Howe had made it clear there was no hurry for him to return to the north.[50] Clinton made no reference to Howe's later letter, urging him to return as quickly as possible, but he did go on to say that, following the failure of the attack on Sullivan's Island, he had proposed to Sir Peter Parker that he should now take his troops to link up with Howe, even suggesting that the health of the men would be affected if they stayed in the harsh southern climate for much longer, something that had not seemed to trouble his thoughts before. To Parker himself, on 17 July, Clinton wrote of the 'absolute necessity'[51] of being at New York as quickly as possible, even suggesting he would be willing to set sail without a frigate escort. This would have been reckless and underlines Clinton's increasing desperation. Eight days later he was writing to Howe himself while finally en route to New York. In this letter, Clinton laid out the case for his defence, again mentioning the long period with no correspondence from the commander-in-chief (although now Clinton claimed it was four months, rather than three), stating that Howe had made no demands on him to return and even suggesting that Howe had implied Clinton would not be needed at all for the start of the campaign in the north.[52]

Clinton's sensitivity on this matter was actually misplaced. Howe had no intention of attacking the American forces around New York before receiving substantial reinforcements from Britain and he was in no way waiting impatiently for

[50] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVII, f. 25, Clinton to Germain, 8 Jul. 1776.
[51] Ibid., f. 36, Clinton to Sir Peter Parker, 17 Jul. 1776.
[52] Ibid., f. 40, Clinton to Howe, 25 Jul. 1776.

Clinton to return so that he could commence his operations. The only suggestion of dissatisfaction with the southern expedition had come in a letter to Lord Dartmouth back in January 1776, in which he had expressed the opinion that it would have been better to concentrate forces on New York rather than dissipate them.[53] However, it was not until 7 June that Howe's small army of around 8,500 had embarked at Halifax, ready to sail to New York, and by then the commander-in-chief had already started to fudge the issue of when he would attack the rebels.[54] On 25 April he had obliquely hinted to Germain that he might be able to take New York before reinforcements arrived from Europe, but by 7 June he had given up thoughts of any such decisive action before his army was substantially reinforced.[55] The first of the reinforcements began to arrive on 8 June, but it was another three weeks before Howe's army was at New York, having reached Sandy Hook on 29 June.[56] Imprecision again enters Howe's correspondence with his political master here. After detailing the strength of the rebel positions on Long Island in a letter sent on 7 July, Howe stated that he would await either the English fleet (bringing the Hessians and Guards from England) *or* Clinton's force before moving.[57] This clearly suggested that the addition of Clinton's men might be enough to persuade him to move, but Clinton had a mere 2,445 men with him according to returns of 1 August and, given Howe's subsequent insistence on awaiting the arrival of all his intended reinforcements, it seems unlikely that Clinton's earlier arrival would have made any

[53] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 33-36, Howe to Dartmouth, 16 Jan. 1776.
[54] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 208-211, Howe to Germain, 7 Jun. 1776.
[55] Ibid., ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776.
[56] Ibid., ff. 212-213, Howe to Germain, 8 Jun. 1776.
[57] Ibid., ff. 214-216, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1776.

difference.[58] On 6 August, in fact, Howe wrote of the importance of having all of the reinforcements before acting.[59]

Clinton had more reason to be concerned with Germain's response to the drawn-out proceedings of the southern expedition. The American Secretary had grown increasingly impatient while awaiting news of the first strike back against the rebels. On 3 May he had urged Howe to remain patient and await the 'large reinforcements'[60] that were on their way from Britain, believing that this would make his ultimate success more assured. By 21 June he was hoping that the arrival of the first units (Highlanders from the 42nd and 71st Regiments) may already have allowed Howe to take New York (these troops had actually started to arrive with Howe on 8 June, but he was still at Halifax at the time). Germain betrayed one of the reasons for his impatience: the immense cost of supplying Howe's army from Britain. Having a firm base at New York would hopefully reduce Howe's dependence on supplies shipped from home.[61] Replying to Howe's letter of 7 July, Germain gave a subtle prod, assuring Howe that the King was quite happy with his decision to await 'the arrival of one of the expected reinforcements'.[62] Two days after writing this to Howe, Germain wrote also to Clinton, in response to a letter of 8 July, declaring himself 'extremely disappointed and mortified'[63] to hear by that letter that Clinton was still to the southward.

This sort of criticism was almost unbearable to Clinton. In his narrative of the war, the defence of his decisions regarding the southern expedition is exhaustive (it takes up the best part of 15 pages in the published version, *The American Rebellion*,

[58] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVII, f. 46, A return of British troops in America, 1 Aug. 1776.
[59] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 228-230, Howe to Germain, 6 Aug. 1776.
[60] Ibid., ff. 116-120, Germain to Howe, 3 May 1776.
[61] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 189-190, Germain to Howe, 21 Jun. 1776.
[62] Ibid., ff. 223-225, Germain to Howe, 22 Aug. 1776.
[63] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 5, Germain to Clinton, 24 Aug. 1776.

while the Battle of Long Island is dealt with in just two)[64] and at the time he despatched his secretary, Richard Reeve, to Britain to defend his name. Reeve's report back, written on 27 August 1776, could not have made comfortable reading. Reeve reported that Germain in particular was unhappy with Clinton's performance, that General Harvey believed he should not have gone south in the first place and that Germain also believed Clinton would now be too late to take part in the attack on New York.[65] Clinton had finally arrived at New York on 31 July and had lost little time in pushing his ideas on Howe.[66] Clinton felt aggrieved, and although Sir Peter Parker would be the main focus of his indignation regarding the southern expedition, Clinton's hypersensitivity would also lead him to be prickly around Howe, whom he partly blamed for being imprecise in his orders. This can be seen clearly in Clinton's pressing of advice on his commanding officer, claiming that he had suggested moving on the rebel positions along the Gowanus Heights on Long Island earlier than the assault was actually made (Howe did not make his move until 27 August). Clinton's insistence that he repeatedly pressed Howe on this suggests that he wanted to remove any possible impression that he had held up the offensive himself. The fact that Howe insisted on awaiting the arrival of the Hessians ought to have calmed Clinton and removed any concerns that he might be blamed for the delay in attacking, but by now he was engaged in a subtle undermining of Howe, a process that would get more overt as their relationship deteriorated.[67]

The first signs of active undermining of Howe had appeared as early as the previous year. In their psychological study of Clinton, Wyatt and Willcox noted the

[64] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 23-38.
[65] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 8, Richard Reeve to Clinton, 27 Aug. 1776.
[66] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 37-40.
[67] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 12, Memo of the affair of Brooklyn 1776, 29 Aug. 1776.

trustworthiness and accuracy of Clinton's documents, claiming that 'everything that is known of his character… acquits him of a wilful effort to deceive'.[68] Clinton began to disprove this on 15 November 1775. Although there had been no falling out with Howe at this time, apart from the slight issue over the report on the battle of Bunker Hill, Clinton began to undermine his commander-in-chief in correspondence with friends and family. Whether this can be viewed as a systematic attempt to discredit Howe, or whether it was merely a product of Clinton's distrust for anyone's opinions but his own, he began to criticise Howe, subtly at first, but with increasing strength. In his letter of 15 November, to General Harvey and the Duke of Newcastle, he lamented that the British army was not already in New York and that it was too late to go there now.[69] Just over a month earlier, however, he had written to General Gage that, although acting from a base at New York was the best option for the campaign the following year, he doubted that reinforcements would arrive in time to take possession of it immediately. This sound reason why New York had not already been taken was conveniently omitted from his later letter.[70]

Following the southern expedition, and in a defensive state of mind, Clinton's undermining gathered pace. Feeling that his plan for an attack on an undefended pass on the extreme left of the rebel lines on the Gowanus Heights had not been well received, he began to disagree with Howe on every point.[71] During the Battle of Long Island, Clinton allowed men under his command to approach a redoubt in the American lines on Brooklyn Heights. This, Clinton freely admitted, was contrary to

[68] Wyatt and Willcox, 'A Psychological Exploration', p. 23.
[69] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 8, Clinton to General Harvey and the Duke of Newcastle (draft), 15 Nov. 1775.
[70] Ibid., Vol. XI, f. 27, Clinton to Gage, 7 Oct. 1775.
[71] Ibid., Vol. XVIII, f. 5, Clinton's plan of attack for Long Island, 25 Aug. 1776; Wilcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 41.

explicit orders from Howe that the lines were not to be assaulted.[72] The subsequent plan to land troops at Kip's Bay on Manhattan was not to Clinton's liking either. In a memorandum of 15 September he declared that he believed the plan could lead to a serious reverse. Instead, Clinton favoured a move to entrap the rebel army on Manhattan by taking the Heights of Fordham, which dominated King's Bridge, the principal route off the island of Manhattan.[73] Clinton's preference for this sort of enveloping manoeuvre was perfectly reasonable and was certainly bolder than the methods Howe ultimately adopted, but Clinton's disagreement was not limited to a mere difference of opinion. There was spite involved as well, such as when he wrote in derogatory fashion of Howe's plan to land at Kip's Bay, dismissing it as having 'no demonstration but what a child would see through'.[74] (This resonates with Clinton's earlier criticism of the plan of attack at Bunker Hill, in which he described the British as an 'army of children'.[75])

In a conference with Howe on 1 October, Clinton disagreed with plans to continue moving against the Americans, believing that they should wait for news from the northern army before doing anything more. He also disagreed with the choice of landing point suggested by Howe as the British continued to press the rebel army and again mentioned the possibility of suffering a defeat.[76] The landing point, Throg's Neck (also sometimes referred to as 'Frog's Neck'), turned out to have been poorly chosen. After disembarking a force under Clinton on 12 October, it was discovered that the route to the mainland (Throg's Neck became an island at high tide) was easily defended and a small force of American riflemen prevented Clinton

[72] Wilcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 43.
[73] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 19, Memo, 15 Sep. 1776.
[74] Ibid., f. 19, Memo, 15 Sep. 1776.
[75] Ibid., Vol. XII, f. 22, Clinton to William Phillips, before 5 Dec. 1775.
[76] Ibid., Vol. XVIII, f. 30, Notes on conference, 1 Oct. 1776.

from moving inland. On 18 October the British troops re-embarked to move to a more advantageous landing point, but not before further damage was done to the Howe-Clinton relationship.[77] Although no surviving documents detail the events clearly, Clinton mentioned in a much later conference with Howe that he (Clinton) had been insulted by orders arriving from Howe during the Throg's Neck debacle. Condemning the entire affair as a 'tweedledum business,'[78] Clinton claimed that he had received several contradictory orders from Howe. This had annoyed Clinton, who felt the orders were unnecessary and condescending. According to Clinton's notes of the meeting, Howe had later told Clinton that he had been entirely satisfied with his actions and that he had, in fact, done exactly as Howe would have wanted even before the orders arrived. Unfortunately for Howe, Clinton was not the sort of man to be easily mollified.

On 27 October Clinton had advised against a direct attack on the rebels at White Plains.[79] On 30 October, Clinton again disagreed with Howe's plans to attack the rebel lines, giving an exhaustive list of reasons, including the 'strength of the post, the difficulty of approach, the little protection from cannon, little chance of making a blow of consequence, the risk after a tolerable good campaign of finishing it by a cheque, the moral certainty of a junction with Burgoyne next year'.[80] Clinton's official account of events at White Plains, as contained in *The American Rebellion*, sidestepped the matter and mentioned only that Howe was aware of his thoughts on the proposed attack, but the draft of Howe's narrative adds further detail.[81] In a section entitled 'In addition to White Plains', which was ultimately left out of the

[77] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 49.
[78] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 26, Memo of conversation with William Howe, 6 Jul. 1777.
[79] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 51.
[80] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 43, memo (partly in cipher), 30 Oct. 1776.
[81] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 53.

narrative as read out to the House of Commons, Howe stated that he had informed Clinton of his intention to attack the American lines with the British soldiers under Clinton's command.[82] Clinton's list of reasons why they should not attack was therefore a more direct rejection of Howe's plan. In the event, bad weather on the morning of 1 November put paid to any hopes of launching the attack.[83]

As well as these differences of opinion, Clinton's disenchantment with Howe continued to develop. In September he wrote to Edward Harvey (although he later deleted the line) 'At last our C[ommander] does me the honour on all occasions to give me the avant garde,'[84] suggesting that he felt he was due more than this and possibly referring to Howe's unwillingness to take his advice. More seriously, during the withdrawal from White Plains, Howe's refusal to allow Clinton to alter the order of march prompted an unguarded comment, in which Clinton stated that he would prefer to command three companies on his own rather than serve under Howe in a bigger force. This outburst was heard by Cornwallis and subsequently passed on to Howe.[85] Rather than accepting that he had been unwise to give voice to such an opinion, Clinton chose to view Cornwallis' revelation as an act of treachery, and even made reference to a conspiracy to undermine the relationship between himself and his commanding officer.[86]

In November, to Harvey again, he bemoaned Howe's decision to send him to Rhode Island, suggesting that a move up the Chesapeake as part of a two-pronged offensive on Philadelphia would be more effective. Clinton rather snidely wrote that Howe must have better intelligence than himself and that 'I am to suppose he has

[82] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 21.
[83] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 52-53.
[84] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 24, Clinton to Edward Harvey (draft), 24 Sep. 1776.
[85] Willcox, ed. *American Rebellion*, pp. 54 & 65 (footnotes).
[86] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 26, Memo of conversation with William Howe, 6 Jul. 1777.

decided for the best'.[87] The memorandum of another conference with Howe, in November, shows that Clinton was again pressing with his alternative ideas for prosecuting the war, but by December his disdain for his commander finally erupted into the open. In a letter to the Duke of Newcastle he referred to him as 'Mr. How,' a clearly derogatory term and one that chimes with a political cartoon of 1777, entitled 'A conference between the Brothers HOW to get Rich'.[88] Presumably at about the same time, although the document is only dated '1776', another Clinton memo, partly in cipher, finally laid all his grievances open.

> I do not esteem the man I serve under. Be assured if ever you serve certain men essentially they never forgive it. I have borne the burden this whole campaign, always command the first attack, always succeed and am never thanked. As I have repeated many times the minister has used his country and me ill by not given me powers. I believe all would have been over and I the happy instrument for these people have told me they treated with me preferably.[89]

It is worth considering what exactly Howe had been doing to generate such an escalating response from Clinton. Howe's correspondence with Clinton appears to have been uniformly business-like and professional. There was none of the flattery, liberally sprinkled with French phrases, that peppered Clinton's correspondence with friends and relatives, but Howe's letters could not be considered cold. He appears to have kept Clinton informed of operational plans and, indeed, to have consulted with him frequently on those plans. Written communication could probably have been more frequent, but this was a general failing of Howe (he was forced to defend himself on this point during the parliamentary inquiry) and certainly not especially

[87] Ibid., Vol. XVIII, f. 55, Clinton to Edward Harvey, 26 Nov. to 1 Dec. 1776.
[88] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 59, Memo of meeting with Howe, Nov. 1776; Ibid., Vol. XIX, Clinton to Newcastle, 9 Dec. 1776: f. 2; 'The conference between the brothers how to get rich', (London: W. Williams, Fleet Street, 10 Oct. 1777).
[89] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XIX, f. 34, Clinton memo (partly in cipher), 1776.

aimed at Clinton.[90] On 14 September, Howe invited Clinton to a meeting to discuss the landing of the army on Manhattan and Clinton's memos note this as well as subsequent meetings.[91] He was kept appraised of enemy movements around New York, of rumours of the approach of Burgoyne from the north and of Cornwallis' success at Fort Lee (originally known as Fort Constitution).[92] It also appears that Howe made efforts to bring his second-in-command over to his way of thinking. He did not merely dismiss Clinton's ideas out of hand, but sought to convince him of his reasons for adopting different plans. Clinton admitted that, regarding the landing at Kip's Bay, Howe 'made use of every argument to induce me to be of his opinion'.[93]

When it came to planning for the capture of Rhode Island, a plan that Clinton disapproved of, Howe delivered clear and concise orders and, following the receipt of intelligence that the rebels had evacuated the island, informed Clinton that he was to proceed there immediately.[94] It was after the successful occupation of Rhode Island that Clinton wrote to Newcastle, referring to his commander-in-chief as 'Mr. How', yet days later Howe wrote a warm congratulatory letter to Clinton, praising him for the smoothly effected occupation and terming it 'an acquisition of infinite importance'.[95] Clinton's claim that he had never been thanked by Howe was obviously mistaken.[96]

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[90] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 2.
[91] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 18, Howe to Clinton, 14 Sep. 1776; Ibid, f. 19, Clinton memo, 15 Sep. 1776; Ibid., f. 30, Clinton's notes on a conference, 1 Oct. 1776.
[92] Ibid., f. 14, Howe to Clinton, 1 Sep. 1776; Ibid., f. 25, Howe to Clinton, 25 Sep. 1776; Ibid., f. 51, Howe to Clinton, 20 Nov. 1776.
[93] Ibid., f. 29, Account of Long Island (written after the publication of Howe's Narrative), 1779.
[94] Ibid., f. 58, Howe to Clinton, 26 Nov. 1776; Ibid., Vol. XIX, f. 1, Howe to Clinton, 3 Dec. 1776.
[95] Ibid., Vol. XIX, f. 16, Howe to Clinton, 21 Dec. 1776.
[96] Ibid., f. 34, Clinton memo (partly in cipher), 1776.

It has been suggested that the decision to put Clinton in command of the Rhode Island expedition was symptomatic of Howe losing patience with his fractious subordinate, a way of getting Clinton, and his endless disagreements and suggestions, out of his way.[97] Although the idea is plausible, there does not seem to be any evidence to support it. Howe had long considered Rhode Island to be an essential acquisition; he had mentioned its importance as a source of supplies back in May, in a letter to Germain, and it would also provide a safe winter harbour for the ships under the command of his brother.[98] Clinton was the obvious choice, as second-in-command, to lead such an important expedition and it seems likely he have complained had the honour been given to somebody else.

Although it has been shown that the Howe-Clinton relationship had already deteriorated to the point where Clinton was thoroughly contemptuous of his commander-in-chief, the capture of Rhode Island provoked more antagonism. Having commended Clinton on his leadership of the expedition, Howe went on to criticise Lord Percy, who took over command at Rhode Island following Clinton's return to Britain in early 1777. Howe wrote to Percy on 7 January 1777, requesting that forage be gathered and sent to him from Rhode Island (one of the main reasons for taking control of Rhode Island was to secure an easier source of supplies), but when Percy took six weeks to reply, and then claimed not to have much forage available, Howe reacted badly. He insinuated that Percy should have taken Providence as well during the initial invasion of Rhode Island, naturally upsetting Percy, who had been subordinate to Clinton at the time.[99] Clinton had actually written to Howe during the invasion to insist that a move on Providence was too risky and might suffer a

[97] Schecter, *Battle for New York*, p. 260.
[98] S. C. Lomas, ed., *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville,* Vol. I (London: Mackie & Co. Ltd, 1904), p. 31, Howe to Germain, 12 May 1776.
[99] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 192.

reverse.[100] It is possible that Howe had originally been frustrated by Clinton's reluctance to be more aggressive and that this spilled over in misdirected anger towards Percy. Whatever the reason, Percy took offence and decided to resign.[101]

Percy's first letter to Clinton on this matter, in February 1777, coincided with Clinton's visit home, where he used a meeting with Germain to inform the American Secretary of his ideas for running the war. Clinton outlined his preference for launching a two-pronged attack on Philadelphia rather than the invasion of Rhode Island, and reported on his pushing of a plan to land behind the rebels on Manhattan following the Battle of Long Island. Clinton claimed, in notes on the meeting, that Germain was impressed with his ideas.[102] Clinton also used his time at home to push his case regarding the southern expedition, eventually (and remarkably) securing the red ribbon of a Knight of the Bath. That Clinton was able to see this as a genuine mark of approval, considering the fact that the southern expedition achieved nothing and was highly embarrassing to himself and Peter Parker, speaks volumes for his ability to delude himself. It seems almost certain that the conferring of an official mark of approval was the only way Germain could see of getting Clinton to let the matter drop, and Clinton even noted, apparently oblivious to the irony, that after their meeting Germain had 'expressed his anxiety for me to be gone, and wished me to name a time'.[103]

Clinton's near-paranoid state of mind by this stage was revealed in his notes of a conversation with General Harvey on the same day, in which Clinton had made it clear that he was accepting the red ribbon as redress for an injustice already received

[100] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XIX, Clinton to Howe, late Dec. 1776, or early Jan. 1777, cited in Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 58 (footnote).
[101] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XX, f. 32, Percy to Clinton, 20 Feb. 1777.
[102] Ibid., f. 47, Memo of meeting with Germain, 7 Apr. 1777.
[103] Ibid.

and that he would not accept any more slights in the future. He also revealed that he was suspicious that Germain would undermine him once he was back in America and that he was jealous of Burgoyne being given command of the northern army to move down the Hudson river.[104]

It was in this frame of mind that Clinton returned to America, to find that he now had a genuine grievance against Howe. By criticising Percy's failure to occupy Providence, Howe was indirectly criticising Clinton, who had actually been in command. This was to become a major source of friction between the two men for the rest of the time they worked together. As a working partnership they were already probably finished, but what was possibly their first conversation after Clinton arrived back in the colonies was to underline the fact. Clinton's memorandum of this conversation with Howe, on 6 July 1777, revealed that their relationship was now hopelessly fractured. On Howe's side there appeared to be genuine regret that they had not been able to work together. On Clinton's side, there was no such impression, and he was less than completely honest with his commanding officer. Clinton opened the conversation by referring to Howe's insinuation that not occupying Providence was a mistake. Both men then professed a desire to be friends, but Clinton claimed that 'secret enemies'[105] were working to make that impossible. Clinton was obviously referring to Cornwallis, and his recounting of Clinton's exclamation that he did not wish to serve under Howe. Cornwallis could hardly be considered a secret enemy, but Clinton seemed more affronted by this supposed betrayal of confidence than embarrassed by his own lack of discretion. Howe then stated that the two of them had never agreed on any single question. Clinton's reply was that they could not be expected to have agreed on everything, considering their very different military

[104] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XX, f. 48, Memo of conversation with Harvey, 7 Apr. 1777.
[105] Ibid., Vol. XXI, f. 26, Memo of conversation with Howe, 6 Jul. 1777.

backgrounds (Clinton had learned his trade in Europe, while most of Howe's experience had come in North America).[106] Clinton claimed that he had always given his opinions freely (which was certainly true) but with the deference due Howe's position as commander-in-chief. Howe in turn replied that he had no use for deference and that the very term was hurtful to him. 'We argued a little bit,' Clinton continued, 'and both thought it right to drop the subject.'[107] According to Clinton, both men agreed that they held each other in high regard but 'by some cursed fatality' they were unable to work together. Clinton here fudged the issue of his dealings with Germain in Britain, claiming that he had been defending the honour of the army when discussing the southern expedition, where in reality he had merely been defending his part in the affair and seeking to shift the blame onto Parker and the Royal Navy. Howe, unaware of Clinton's actual motives, was apparently touched by this and (Clinton believed) felt guilty at the bad impression he had formed of his second-in-command.[108]

This most revealing memorandum, effectively describing the final breakdown of a relationship, might have been expected to draw a line under matters to some extent, but despite having agreed that the subject should be dropped, Clinton went on to mention Howe's 'insinuation'[109] in further conferences on 8, 11 and 13 July. On each occasion it is clear that Clinton was initially angry about Howe's criticism, and that he calmed down after receiving reassurances from Howe that he had not intended to criticise him. On 8 July Clinton wrote that their conversation was 'very warm' at

[106] Willcox, ed. *American Rebellion*, p. xiv; Gruber, 'William Howe', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [Online].
[107] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 26, Memo of conversation with Howe, 6 Jul. 1777.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

first, but that he was composed after receiving Howe's reassurances.[110] On 11 July he again raised the matter, to be told by Howe that he had only one wish; that the two could 'draw together'.[111] On 13 July, Clinton again raised the issue, and Howe again denied having intended any affront.[112] The fact that Clinton repeatedly returned to the issue after apparently accepting Howe's reassurances must have been confusing and draining for Howe, yet Clinton's memoranda do not hint at any loss of patience from the commander-in-chief, who actually comes over in a far more sympathetic light than Clinton himself. This is an important point. The notes of the meetings between Howe and Clinton are among the most valuable evidence available regarding Howe's conduct while in command. If Clinton, who held Howe in contempt, nevertheless depicted the man in a favourable light in these notes, then that is extremely telling. Howe repeatedly comes across as a patient man, one who was at pains to establish a working relationship with his second-in-command, despite repeated rebuffs. This does not appear to be a man who was oblivious to, or unconcerned with, his subordinate's opinions.

Clinton would continue to serve as Howe's second-in-command for the duration of the 1777 campaign, but he was already set on resigning once the campaign was over.[113] Howe, finding it impossible to work alongside Clinton and realising that his second-in-command did not wish to work alongside him, had little alternative but to place him in command of the troops at New York while the bulk of the army moved on Philadelphia. Clinton viewed this as a further slight and seethed at the limitations imposed upon him by his small force at New York, while Burgoyne, an officer junior

[110] Ibid., f. 29, Memo of conversation with Howe, 8 Jul. 1777.
[111] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 37, Memo of conversation with Howe, 11 Jul. 1777.
[112] Ibid., f. 42, Memo of conversation with Howe, 13 Jul. 1777.
[113] Ibid., Vol. XXII, f. 20, Clinton to the Duke of Newcastle, 22 Jul. 1777.

to him, commanded an army acting on the offensive with an opportunity to seize personal glory, but he had left Howe with no alternative.[114]

Howe and Clinton did not work closely together during the 1777 campaign, so there are no revealing memoranda of conversations to draw on, but Howe's communications with his second-in-command continued to be business-like and professional. He actually went further than this when requesting that Clinton send him some of the regiments under his command at New York. Aware of the limitations of Clinton's position, he apologised for requesting the troops and insisted that he would not have done so were it not essential.[115] Howe was also free with his praise for Clinton's move on the rebel positions in the Hudson Highlands in October of that year.[116]

Despite Howe's efforts, however, Clinton continued to chafe and formally requested to be relieved of his command in New York on 26 October 1777. Howe's reply of 10 November included a detailed defence of his actions towards Clinton, but there was also a sense of resignation. Howe noted from Clinton's letter:

> …that you conceive yourself not at liberty, consistent with your honor, to serve another campaign in America, if I should be continued in the command of the army, from whence I am to conclude you think I have been remiss in attention to you as second in command… Upon your arrival at York this year you repeatedly mentioned your dislike to serve in the same corps with me; there was then no alternative than the command at New York, in which (by the way) you have gained much honor and done singular good service… with respect to my drawing the troops lately arrived from New York, to strengthen this army, be assured it was not done without admitting every consideration, and from a conviction the

[114] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 38, Clinton to General Harvey, 11 Jul. 1777; Ibid., f. 39, Clinton to Newcastle, 11 Jul. 1777; Ibid., f. 40, Clinton to Percy, 12 Jul. 1777; Ibid., Vol. XXIV, f. 10, Clinton to General Harvey, 19 Sep. 1777.
[115] Ibid., Vol. XXV, ff. 38, 39 & 37, three letters from Howe to Clinton, 8 Oct., 9 Oct. & 25 Oct. 1777. The letter dated 8 Oct. was the first request for the reinforcements: the 7th, 26th and 63rd Regiments, two battalions of Anspach troops and the 17th Dragoons.
[116] Ibid., ff. 37 & 44, two letters from Howe to Clinton, 25 Oct. 1777 & 26 Oct. 1777.

> measure was absolutely necessary… the King's service must suffer materially by your absence.[117]

Clinton was displeased that the personal nature of his dissatisfaction with Howe had become so apparent and even suggested to Howe that he had been misquoted.[118] In private correspondence, however, he admitted that dissatisfaction over Burgoyne's superior command was merely a smokescreen for public consumption and that the real reason for his request to resign his position was his unwillingness to continue to serve under Howe. 'I have served this campaign cheerfully,'[119] he wrote (with a shocking absence of self-awareness) to General Harvey, but went on to admit that there was no chance of a cordial relationship with Howe and that they disagreed on almost every military matter. He also claimed that Cornwallis had repeated his words to Howe in an attempt to drive a wedge between the two, but Clinton had already admitted that there was no common ground between himself and Howe. To the Duke of Newcastle, he made it clear that his personal dissatisfaction with Howe pre-dated the affair over Lord Percy and the failure to occupy Providence. It was in this letter that Clinton revealed that he had mentioned to a friend that he would rather desert than continue to serve after the following campaign (but he also claimed that he was exaggerating for effect).[120]

The slow deterioration in Howe's relationship with Clinton would have been a distraction to his work as commander-in-chief, but it need not have been disastrous. Howe was still apparently able to take his army where he wanted and choose his own strategy and tactics. Although Clinton's permanent grumbling would have become annoying, the fact that Howe is depicted by Clinton as retaining his patience during

[117] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXVII, f. 8, Howe to Clinton, 10 Nov. 1777.
[118] Ibid., f. 51, Clinton to Howe, 2 Dec. 1777.
[119] Ibid., Vol. XXIX, f. 1, Clinton to General Harvey, 19 Dec. 1777.
[120] Ibid., f. 2, Clinton to Newcastle, 19 Dec. 1777.

their many conferences suggests that he did not find it unbearable. Where Clinton may have had a far more serious effect on Howe's performance was in the strangely pessimistic approach he took to operations.

Clinton is generally considered to have been a bold officer when not in command himself, always putting forward plans and stratagems and seemingly in favour of decisive action.[121] Closer consideration of his advice, however, reveals a more cautious frame of mind and it was this approach to the war that directly impinged on Howe's command. Early in the 1776 campaign, while planning was still underway, Howe repeatedly claimed to be looking for a decisive victory over Washington's army.[122] He wrote of his hope that rebel confidence would be high after forcing the British out of Boston, and that it might be possible to lure them into a major battle.[123] Around the same time, he ordered an assault on the fortified positions on Dorchester Heights while still in Boston, casting doubt on the assumption that his experience at Breed's Hill had knocked the appetite for battle out of him (his men did not seem to have been dispirited either, as Howe wrote of the 'ardor of the troops'[124] encouraging him to plan an attack that only bad weather prevented).

When Clinton and Howe were reunited following the failed southern expedition, Clinton certainly presented a variety of plans for Howe's consideration, but also revealed a distinctly conservative side. Clinton repeatedly wrote of his concern that the British must not offer the Americans even the possibility of a successful action, however small. After British forces landed on Long Island, he criticised the decision to move a force under Cornwallis towards Flatbush, claiming

[121] Wyatt and Willcox, 'A Psychological Exploration', p. 7; W. B. Willcox, 'Sir Henry Clinton: Paralysis of Command', in *George Washington's Generals*, ed. Billias, pp. 75-7; Mackesy, *War for America*, pp. 213-214.
[122] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 33-36, Howe to Lord Dartmouth, 16 Jan. 1776.
[123] Ibid., ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776.
[124] Ibid., ff. 87-92, Howe to Lord Dartmouth, 21 Mar. 1776.

that he knew it would provoke skirmishing and that this might give the rebels a taste of success. On the plan to land at Kip's Bay, on York Island, he was more critical, claiming that it offered 'little prospect of victory without buying it dear' and that there was 'some apprehension of receiving – what we might have given – a defeat *en détail*'.[125] Given the fact that the rebels offered no resistance to the landing whatsoever (a naval bombardment forced them to abandon their defensive works even before any British soldiers landed), Clinton's caution seems misplaced, and he had also recently witnessed how easily the Americans had been routed from positions on Long Island that they had been strengthening for weeks.[126]

Clinton again voiced concern over a possible serious defeat when discussing plans for the landing at Throg's Neck. His memorandum of that conference with Howe records how he (Clinton) would have preferred to wait for news from Burgoyne before moving against the Americans.[127] Again, the landing proved uneventful and even though it turned out to have been a poorly chosen point to disembark, there was no danger of suffering a serious defeat. On 30 October, Clinton spoke against attacking the rebel lines at White Plains.[128] This is a key point, because White Plains is one of the moments in the war that critics of Howe have used to demonstrate his timidity and unwillingness to commit his troops.[129] Having manoeuvred Washington's army off York Island following the Battle of Long Island, Howe had allowed the American general to take up a defensive position near the village of White Plains. On 28 October there was a small action to dislodge a body of rebels

[125] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 40-41 & 45.
[126] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 274-276, Howe to Germain, 21 Sep. 1776.
[127] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 30, notes on a conference with Howe, 1 Oct. 1776.
[128] Ibid., f. 43, memo (partly in cipher), 30 Oct. 1776.
[129] Weintraub, *Iron Tears*, p. 77. Weintraub commented on Howe's unwillingness to tackle the remnants of Washington's army; Galloway, *Letters to a Nobleman*, p. 47; Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 89-90, 'Hints for the management of an intended enquiry', 1777 or 1778.

from a hill on the extreme right of the American lines. Howe intended to follow this up with an assault on the main American lines, but when he consulted Clinton on the matter he was presented with his exhaustive list of reasons why no attack should be made. Once more, Clinton had voiced his concerns over the possibility of suffering a setback. The conversation continued, with Clinton advising that taking possession of a 'bald hill' on the left would force the Americans from their lines. One of the more common criticisms of Howe is that he constantly favoured manoeuvring the enemy out of a position rather than assaulting it. Here it can be clearly seen that it was Clinton who suggested this sort of approach at White Plains, while Howe was favouring an assault. Despite Clinton's cautions, Howe made preparations to attack on 1 November, with Clinton leading from the centre. This plan was thwarted, with bad weather again putting in an unwelcome appearance.[130] In his own account of the affair, Clinton failed to mention his list of objections to an assault, stating only that he had advised caution in any move. This is plainly a misleading account of his conversation with Howe, and Clinton also wrote that he had informed Howe that he (ever the good soldier) would be ready to attack whenever the order was given.[131]

In assessing the impact Clinton made on Howe's command of the British army it is important to note that Clinton's pessimism about various plans did not prevent Howe from enacting them. His disagreement on every point the two discussed did not push Howe's patience to snapping point. His personal disdain for Howe was not reciprocated and his undermining of Howe in letters to friends and relatives was repaid by fulsome praise of his performance in the field. In short, Howe was not crippled by having a second-in-command who disagreed with his every order, yet it simply must have been wearing for him to deal with the constant stream of

[130] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 20 Nov. 1776.
[131] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 52-53.

suggestions, the endless disagreements and the mounting evidence of his personal dislike. It is clear that Howe, though disappointed with events, was able to deal with the situation and that he worked hard to maintain a positive working relationship. However, it is only when considered in the light of problems in other areas, when Clinton's influence is considered as merely one of the problems faced by Howe, that a true picture of the pressures upon the commander-in-chief can be revealed.

II

Howe's army

The quality of Howe's army was for a long time largely unquestioned. Many historians praised it as large and efficient (the comparison of 'the hardened veteran' and 'the ingenuous recruit'[1] was not uncommon). Where historians have looked closely at the make-up of the armies involved, a more considered opinion has developed. Michael Stephenson stated the simple fact that few men in Howe's army would have experienced active service when hostilities broke out, being too young to have taken part in the last two major battles fought by the British Army, at Minden and Quebec in 1759.[2] Other recent works have also explored this theme, most notably *Fusiliers*, by Mark Urban, which went further and argued that the troops under Howe were not only inexperienced, but were also disastrously ill-disciplined. Urban used this as the starting point for his thesis that the army improved steadily throughout the war (in his own words, how it 'lost America but learned to fight'[3]). The British army in America undoubtedly improved as the war progressed, but Urban's assertion that it was a rigorous program of drill and training (instigated by Howe) that was responsible for this improvement is debateable, as shall be shown.

It is important to explore the abilities of the fighting men under Howe's command, but equally important in the context of this thesis is his opinion of them. Confidence, or a lack thereof, in the men he led would inevitably play a large part in

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[1] S. Ward Jr, *The Battle of Long Island: A lecture delivered before the New York Historical Society, February 7 1839* (New York: William Osborn, 1839), p. 15; Weintraub, *Iron Tears*, p. 72. Weintraub offered a remarkably similar assessment; '32,000 soldiers, most of them experienced and fully equipped…' contrasted with '19,000 scrappily equipped and trained Continentals'; Griffith, *War for American Independence*, pp. 201-202. Griffith commented especially on the professionalism and discipline of the British army.
[2] M. Stephenson, *Patriot Battles: How the War of Independence was Fought* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 44.
[3] Urban, *Fusiliers*.

determining strategy and also decisions on the battlefield. It would not be fair to suggest that Howe was able to choose whatever course of action he desired at any given time. He was given tremendous latitude by his political superiors to make and change his own plans, but he was still constrained by his army's size, composition and quality. This chapter will consider how much that influenced his decision-making as commander-in-chief.

Howe's experience in the French and Indian War (1754-1763), and his reputation as an expert in light infantry tactics, were attractive qualities as a new commander-in-chief was sought to run the war.[4] Far from being rigidly bound to conventional European methods, key British figures, including Germain, realised the need to adapt to American conditions. Howe, having adapted in the previous war, was a strong candidate to lead the army. Germain appears to have believed that Howe would be able to mould his army to suit the conditions in America, with the light infantry performing essential work in screening the main body of the army from enemy irregular troops. Germain showed that the lessons of the last war were not lost on him, explicitly referring to the disaster suffered by Major General Edward Braddock at the Monongahela River, on 9 June 1755. The pertinent lessons drawn from that defeat, as far as Germain was concerned, were the need to abandon rigid formations on the American battlefield and to disperse the light infantry, who should find cover behind trees, walls or hedges and engage the enemy from there.[5]

Maldwyn Jones's chapter on Howe in *George Washington's Generals and Opponents* argued that conventional thinking in terms of strategy was a theme of Howe's period in command, but he was not believed to be conventional when it came

[4] J. F. C. Fuller, *British Light Infantry in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1925), p. 124.
[5] Lomas, ed., *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville,* Vol. II (Hereford: Hereford Times Co. Ltd, 1910), p. 2, Germain to Lord Suffolk, 16 Jun. 1775.

to tactics.[6] Germain's championing of him as a man of 'more than common abilities'[7] made it clear that he was expecting great things from his new commander, but curiously, the dashing light infantry officer that Germain appeared to be counting on never materialised.

Howe's experiences in the French and Indian War included command of the light troops under Major General James Wolfe during the capture of Quebec, and his leading of an advanced party of 24 men that secured the Plains of Abraham for Wolfe to mount his assault is justifiably celebrated.[8] Howe also appears to have led his light infantry well during the battle, protecting the left flank of Wolfe's army from enemy irregular troops, including Canadians and Indians.[9] This conflict, the counterpart to the European-based Seven Years' War, gave several key British officers (including Gage and Cornwallis, as well as Howe) a taste of war in the difficult terrain of North America. The lessons were often severe. Braddock's small army of 1,400 at the Monongahela suffered casualties of nearly 1,000 when attacked by an inferior force made up mostly of Indians, but by the end of the war it is generally agreed that British light infantry, led by capable officers like Amherst, Wolfe and George Augustus Howe (William Howe's eldest brother, who died at Ticonderoga in 1758), had at least attained parity with the irregular Indian, French and Canadian forces ranged against them.[10]

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[6] M. Jones, 'Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist' in *George Washington's Generals and Opponents: Their Exploits and Leadership*, ed. G. A. Billias (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), pp. 39-72.
[7] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 2, Germain to Lord Suffolk, 16 Jun. 1775.
[8] Fuller, *British Light Infantry*, pp. 94-95.
[9] Stevens, ed., *Orderly Book*, pp. vii-viii.
[10] J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army, First Part to the Close of the Seven Years' War, Vol. II* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1899), p. 591; Fuller, *British Light Infantry*, pp. 95-96.

The problem was that those honed light infantry companies were disbanded following the war. Fuller argued that it was misguided complacency about the ease with which light troops could be assembled following the outbreak of war that was at the heart of the matter, but he also cited the infatuation with the elaborate parade-ground evolutions of Frederick the Great of Prussia (although John Childs argued that the 'Prussianization'[11] of the British army did not really start before 1786).[12] Despite the decision to disband them, the light infantry had their champions and a common opinion was that they would inevitably be needed again. This was underlined by a section devoted to them in a publication by Captain Bennett Cuthbertson, from 1768, in which he acknowledged that although the light infantry was not an official part of a regiment at the time of writing, they would undoubtedly be called into being once more when war broke out again.[13] Cuthbertson did not get round to addressing the duties of a light infantry company until the last chapter of his book (after sections dealing with marriages, book-keeping and the 'suppression of all sorts of immoralities'[14]), but when he did briefly touch on their benefits he made the observation that such soldiers could not simply be conjured up in time of war. The special skills they had to master meant they needed to be formed and drilled in peacetime, and he lamented that the same consideration that had led to marines and light cavalry being maintained on the establishment had not been extended to the light infantry. Skirmishing through woods was one of the duties Cuthbertson outlined for such a body of men, but he also suggested that the separate companies could be formed into battalions, 'to push forward the operations of the campaign, with greater

[11] J. Childs, 'The Army and the State in Britain and Germany during the Eighteenth Century' in Brewer, J. and Hellmuth, E., eds, *Rethinking Leviathan: The Eighteenth-Century State in Britain and Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 62.
[12] Fuller, *British Light Infantry*, pp. 111-112.
[13] B. Cuthbertson, *A System for the Compleat Interior Management and Economy of a Battalion of Infantry* (Bristol: Rouths and Nelson, 1776, new edition), p. 190.
[14] Ibid., p. 129.

vigour'.[15] Cuthbertson was proved right. Two years after his work was published, light companies were reinstated, but many of the lessons learned on active duty had inevitably been forgotten and it is hardly surprising that the new companies were initially of indifferent quality.[16]

Light infantry training prior to the American War of Independence

Howe enhanced his reputation as a light infantry expert by organising a six-week training camp at Salisbury, from 6 August to 22 September 1774. Seven light infantry companies (from the 3rd, 11th, 21st, 29th, 32nd, 36th and 70th Regiments) were put through a series of drills that Howe had devised himself.[17] This was not intended to be an isolated event; following a review of the manoeuvres by the King (at Richmond, on 3 October 1774), it was ordered that the drills be practised by all regiments in the army and it appears that the new skills were then passed on from one regiment to another. In 1775, the 9th Regiment was instructed in the new drills by the 33rd (who were not themselves present at the camp, suggesting that the dissemination of knowledge was at least partially effective).[18] It is also possible that Howe's manoeuvres were about to be taught to the garrison at Boston just prior to hostilities breaking out. Orders, on 15 and 16 April 1775, that the light companies were to assemble to learn 'new evolutions' and 'new manoeuvres'[19] may have signalled this,

[15] Cuthbertson, *Interior Management*, pp. 189-192.
[16] Fuller, *British Light Infantry*, p. 124.
[17] Ibid., p. 125; M. H. Spring, *With Zeal and with Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), pp. 335
[18] R. Lamb, *Memoir of His Own Life, by R. Lamb, Serjeant in the Royal Welch Fuzileers* (Dublin: J. Jones, 1811), pp. 89-90.
[19] A. French, ed., *A British Fusilier in Revolutionary Boston: Being the Diary of Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie, Adjutant of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, January 5–April 30, 1775* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), pp. 48 & 49.

but might simply have been a cover for preparations for the march on Concord, which commenced on the night of 18 April.

Details on Howe's training camp are scarce, but a slim document has survived, outlining the manoeuvres and, especially, the review overseen by the King.[20] This booklet details a series of manoeuvres and the words of command to initiate them. Key points were the intervals to be kept between files (termed 'order', 'open order' and 'extended order', they were two, four and 10-feet intervals, respectively) and the speed at which the evolutions were to be carried out ('march', 'march march' and 'advance' meaning slow time, quick time and run, respectively).[21] Although a list of manoeuvres may not suggest free-moving light infantry formations, it is important to note that Howe's approach here would have found favour with at least one other light infantry expert of the era. The Hessian Jäger commander Johann von Ewald (who fought under Howe in the War of Independence) insisted that line companies should be trained in light infantry techniques and vice versa. He dismissed the notion that light troops did not need to be proficient in manoeuvres (because they would not be expected to fight in close order during pitched battles), believing that drill was essential for their discipline and pride. He also reasoned that well-drilled troops would appear more formidable to an enemy.[22] Drilling light companies as a battalion was also an accepted concept; von Ewald advocated grouping light companies into battalions during operations, although they could stay with their respective regiments during peacetime. Even then, he recommended drilling them in battalion strength.[23]

[20] NAM, 'Discipline established by Major General Howe for Light Infantry in Battalion, Sarum September 1774'.
[21] Ibid., pp. 1-13.
[22] J. von Ewald, *A Treatise Upon the Duties of Light Troops* (London: C. Roworth, 1803), pp. 31-33.
[23] Ibid., pp. 1-3.

In all, 12 pages of Howe's slim volume were devoted to manoeuvres, with a further three covering platoon exercise, or loading of a musket. Just four further pages completed the manual, but these are by far the most revealing and demonstrate that Howe's camp involved far more than parade-ground drills. The final four pages dealt with 'Light Infantry Movements before his Majesty at Richmond Park, 3 October 1774'[24] and prove that the manoeuvres were taught within the context of a series of tactical situations; a plain, wood, hill and house provided focal points for the manoeuvres, allowing the companies to extend or contract their order at various speeds in realistic situations. It even appears that a body of men may have played the part of an enemy force during the review. At one point, three light companies attacked an 'enemy' posted on rising ground to the left of the battalion, while three more advanced on a house to the right that had also been occupied. A single company in extended order (10-feet intervals between files) maintained communications between the two corps. The enemy then fell back to a hill to take up a new position, which was in turn attacked.[25]

Of particular interest is the use made of trees. Soldiers approached the house using the trees as cover and then fired from behind them. 'Tree' was even used as a verb ('March thro' the wood in extended order, halt at the edge of it, tree and fire by files'[26]). This would suggest that Germain's faith in Howe was well placed, as this was one of the key elements that Germain believed essential to successfully fighting in North America. Firing was almost always ordered by files, in which the two-man file on the right of a formation would fire first, followed by the next file. In this way shots would be aimed, rather than delivered *en masse*, and the concept of firing by

[24] NAM, 'Discipline established by Major General Howe', f. 19.
[25] Ibid., ff. 19-22.
[26] Ibid., f. 19.

files while advancing is a recurring theme in the manual.[27] However, other elements of the drill do not fit so neatly into light infantry orthodoxy and it is revealing to see how Howe used the battalion. The companies actually took on roles that would be seen in a corps of combined line and light infantry. In this respect, flankers were employed and at one stage several companies launched a frontal assault on an enemy position on the hill, screened by an advanced line of skirmishers.[28] The document even noted how the assaulting companies would have been checked by an enemy volley (simulating this was part of the display on 3 October) and would have taken a moment to recover. Historians would not consider such a frontal assault to be part of classic light infantry tactics.[29] Likewise, the mention of firing by companies and by volley (although there was just one in each case) do not fit into the standard 'free-moving, free-firing'[30] model of a light infantryman in action.[31]

Howe's detailed thoughts on light infantry were never committed to paper. Had he written a treatise on the use of light troops, as Ewald was to do after the war, it would be possible to be certain of his thoughts on the matter, but the scant details of his light infantry camp provide evidence upon which to draw. Imagining Howe's light infantry companies advancing as regular infantry, screened by fellow light infantrymen deployed as skirmishers and flankers, is at first puzzling, but it hints at what Howe's philosophy may have been. He appears to have believed that his light infantry battalion had to be able to take on some of the duties of heavy infantry, being prepared to assault defences rather than merely preparing the way for the line

[27] NAM, 'Discipline established by Major General Howe', ff. 19-21.
[28] Ibid., f. 22.
[29] D. Gates, *The British Light Infantry Arm, c. 1790-1815* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1987), p. 10. Gates characterised light infantry practice as it emerged in the eighteenth century as 'forced marches, "hit and run" raids, fluid skirmishes in woods and enclosures, ambushes, and other ruses'.
[30] Ibid., p.6.
[31] NAM, 'Discipline established by Major General Howe', f. 19.

companies. He appears to have viewed his composite battalion as an elite corps, able to manoeuvre at speed and retain cohesion when fighting in extended order, but it was not merely an adjunct force to flank or screen heavy infantry. It was to be a self-sufficient unit that could operate independently of line companies (if this was not the case, he would presumably have invited some line infantry to take part in his exercises). This would, theoretically, enable the light infantry to move more quickly, unencumbered by slower heavy troops and able to flow seamlessly from one formation to another, taking on the different roles (flanker, skirmisher, assaulting troops) as needed. Howe's vision of a light infantry corps appears to have been one of a fast-moving, hard-hitting, independent force, able to take on and overwhelm enemy positions, driving them from defensive works and then pursuing them relentlessly ('they [the light companies] fire upon the flying enemy, continuing to pursue from one strong post to another, until at length he surrenders'[32]).

This would be demanding work and would require resourceful men. A publication dating from the time of the French and Indian War throws a good deal of light on what expectations were placed on these soldiers. William Smith's *An Historical Account of Bouquet's Expedition Against the Ohio Indians in 1764* was first published in 1765 and went into great detail on how a light infantryman should be trained, dressed and equipped for operations in North America.[33] Starting with a detailed description of how an irregular force, such as one composed of Indians, might attack a conventional European army, Smith went on to describe how that mode of warfare could be countered. Light troops, or 'hunters', should be (according to Smith) light in every way: lightly clothed, lightly armed and lightly accoutred.

[32] NAM, 'Discipline established by Major General Howe', f. 22.
[33] W. Smith, *An Historical Account of Bouquet's Expedition Against the Ohio Indians in 1764* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Robert Clarke & Co., 1868).

Smith went on to describe a veritable super-soldier, recruited from the age of 15 and able to leap logs and ditches, pursue an enemy tirelessly, fire and reload with great rapidity, swim across rivers (pushing clothes and weapons before them on a small raft), perform complex evolutions at the run and attain such a mastery of every element of soldiering that they would, in time, become 'tolerable good carpenters, joiners, wheelwrights, coopers, armourers, smiths, masons, brickmakers, saddlers, tailors, butchers, bakers, shoemakers, curriers, etc.'.[34] There is no way of knowing if Howe was familiar with Smith's book. He is not generally reckoned to have been a student of warfare (Ira Gruber's recent work on the literature read by British officers has no information on Howe, but this may again be the result of the scarcity of documents on which to draw)[35] and it is probably safer to assume that he had never read it, but it is reasonable to suggest that the tone of the work would have chimed with Howe's own experiences in North America.

Howe's training camp alone would have been scant preparation for war, even assuming that the ripple effect of regiments passing on their new skills was effective (intriguingly, the copy of Howe's manual at the National Army Museum is marked 'No. 287,'[36] suggesting that multiple copies were prepared and distributed) but further evidence shows that light infantry training was undertaken regularly by British troops in Boston in the period immediately prior to the outbreak of hostilities. This small army would form the nucleus of Howe's force in America and its quality at the start of the war is of critical importance when considering Howe's leadership.

Howe was not the only British officer to learn light infantry tactics in the previous war. Gage had actually been with Braddock at the Monongahela and it

[34] Smith, *Bouquet's Expedition*, pp. 107-116.
[35] I. D. Gruber, *Books and the British Army in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
[36] NAM, 'Discipline established by Major General Howe', f. ii.

would have been a very stubborn traditionalist indeed who could not draw lessons from that. Gage, in fact, raised and commanded a light infantry battalion following his experience alongside Braddock.[37] This clashes with the accepted picture of Gage as a man out of his depth (Germain said as much in a letter to Suffolk, depicting Gage as a man who did not have the imagination to 'venture to take a single step beyond the letter of his instructions'[38]). Fuller was even more damning of Gage, condemning him as a mediocre general who could not learn from experience. Fuller also claimed that British infantry training prior to the American War of Independence was flawed and contributed directly to the problems at Bunker Hill and the earlier retreat from Concord.[39] Both themes were picked up by other historians, including Piers Mackesy.[40]

There is strong evidence to dispute these assertions. In a private journal by Dr Robert Honyman, fairly detailed descriptions are made of the training undertaken by British troops at Boston in early 1775. Honyman's journal was written as discontent in the colonies was bubbling over and he often reported seeing local militia training as well. In a country that appeared to be on the verge of slipping into open hostilities it is unsurprising that the British garrison at Boston would be regularly drilled, but it is the nature of that drill that is of most interest here. Honyman described how, on 22 March 1775, he spent an entertaining morning watching British troops drill on the common. In particular, it was the activities of the light infantry companies that caught his eye. Describing them as 'young active fellows'[41], he wrote that they took part in the same

[37] Fuller, *British Light Infantry*, pp. 125-127.
[38] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 2, Germain to Lord Suffolk, 16 Jun. 1775.
[39] Fuller, *British Light Infantry*, pp. 126-127.
[40] Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 78.
[41] P. Padelford, ed., *Colonial Panorama 1775: Dr. Robert Honyman's Journal for March and April* (Pasadena: San Pasqual Press, 1939), p. 43.

drills as their comrades in the line companies (also known as 'hatmen'), but also practised irregular tactics. This included lying on their backs to reload (thus presenting a very small target) and firing while lying prone. They also massed on the wings of their regiments, firing constantly but independently (there was no volley fire from them, with each man picking out his own shots) and acted both to secure a retreat and to screen a body of men forming up. This sounds like classic light infantry tactics and although Honyman cannot be held up as a military expert, it is clear that he had at least some understanding of what he was watching, and he insisted that some of the regiments he watched were 'extremely expert in their discipline'.[42] It is also worth noting that the companies Honyman watched were not grouped together in a light infantry battalion, but appear to have remained with their respective regiments.

As well as the light infantry drill, Honyman described how he watched a regiment engaged in target practice. It is often stated that eighteenth century muskets were too inaccurate to make aimed shots of much value; the massed volley was the answer to this, trusting that a large number of musket balls would be sure to hit something, whereas individual shots would be likely to miss their targets completely.[43] Honyman watched as an entire regiment was drilled, the soldiers stepping forward individually to fire at a target. Disappointingly, Honyman did not note how far away the target was, or how accurate was the fire, but the drill continued until each man had fired 10 rounds. Marines then fired by platoons, companies and files (but still aiming at targets). Interestingly, Honyman claimed that Gage was overseeing these drills and that they took place despite extremely cold weather and

[42] Padelford, ed., *Colonial Panorama*, p. 43.
[43] Spring, *With Zeal and with Bayonets Only*, pp. 199-200; M. Stephenson, *Patriot Battles: How the War of Independence was Fought* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 124; G. Neumann, *The History of the Weapons of the American Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 14-15; C. I. Archer, J. R. Ferris, H. H. Herwig and T. H. E. Travers, *World History of Warfare* (London: Cassell, 2003), p. 320;

frequent flurries of snow. Three days later, Honyman saw five companies again engage in target practice, again firing 10 rounds per man. As well as these detailed descriptions, he also briefly noted seeing British soldiers drilling on 20, 27 and 31 March and again on 1 April, before his travels took him away from Boston.[44]

Again, it must be said that tension in the colonies was mounting at this time, so regular drill would be expected, but Gage had been drilling his men for months by this point. On 21 November 1774 he had issued orders that the men were to exercise whenever the weather was fine and that this should include firing with live ammunition. Regiments fired at targets on 3 December, while on 7 December the 4th, 5th, 38th, 47th and 52nd Regiments took part in a field day on the common (a field day allowed concentrations of troops, five full regiments in this case, to stage mock battles, including ambushes and the storming and holding of defensive works, and were therefore highly valued as methods of bringing a garrison closer to battle-readiness).[45] John Houlding noted that musket balls were very sparingly supplied in peacetime (at the near-farcical amount of two to four balls per man *per year*) and that it was only in time of war that enough lead shot was available for target practice, suggesting that the British garrison in Boston was well aware that hostilities were imminent.[46]

The diary of Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie of the 23rd Regiment adds more detail. Mackenzie told how regiments were frequently given target practice, although he reported that six rounds per man was the usual number of shots. He also provided the fascinating information that the targets employed were full-size cut-outs of human

[44] Padelford, ed., *Colonial Panorama*, pp. 41, 44, 50, 53, 57 & 61.
[45] J. Barker, *The British in Boston, Being the Diary of Lieutenant John Barker of the King's Own Regiment from November 15, 1774 to May 31, 1776* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), pp. 7, 8, 9 & 10.
[46] J. A. Houlding, 'The Training of the British Army, 1715–1795' (unpublished PhD, King's College, University of London, 1978), p. 159.

figures, made of thin board.[47] The switch from bulls-eye targets to human-shaped cut-outs has been cited by David Grossman (a psychologist and former officer in the United States Army) as one of the modern developments employed by armies to increase the effectiveness of their men and their willingness to fire upon the enemy, yet here is clear evidence that the British were using this sophisticated technique in the eighteenth century.[48] Grossman claimed that this type of drill served to instil a reflex action known as 'automaticity', making it more likely that they would be willing to fire at an enemy, and also commented on the rewarding of soldiers for proficient marksmanship (by granting leave or awarding a badge). Mackenzie reported that exactly the same sort of rewards system was in place in Boston in 1775, saying that 'Premiums are sometimes given for the best shots, by which means some of our men have become excellent marksmen'.[49] It would be going too far to suggest that British officers in eighteenth-century Boston were aware of automaticity on a conscious level, but there seems to have been an instinctive understanding of the concept. Mackenzie also noted that objects were sometimes pointed out on the sea to be fired at, adding the extra difficulty of a moving target.[50]

This was clearly not a garrison that was falling into slothful ways, and the training appears to have been quite sophisticated, but British troops were about to perform poorly during the first engagements of the conflict. Just how poorly they performed, and what the reasons for this were, have been the subject of some debate.

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[47] A. French, ed., *A British Fusilier*, pp. 28-29.
[48] Grossman, *On Killing* (London: Little, Brown & Company, 1995). Online version by E-Rights/E-Reads Ltd., New York, available: www.books.google.co.uk/books?id=LgpKId3vZcIC (no page numbers given). Accessed 27 Sep. 2013.
[49] A. French, ed., *A British Fusilier*, p. 29.
[50] Ibid.

Early engagements

The 'shot heard round the world'[51], fired on 19 April 1775, signalled the outbreak of open hostilities between Britain and her colonial subjects. A column comprising the light and grenadier companies of nine regiments of the Boston garrison had been ordered by Gage to march via Lexington to Concord and seize a suspected cache of military supplies. The march back became a nightmare as swarming militia kept up a constant fire on the retreating British. Were it not for a relief column, led by Percy, the 900 or so men of the light and grenadier companies might conceivably have been forced to surrender. As it was, casualties numbered over 200, with 68 dead, making this a very costly opening gambit by the British.[52]

A lack of discipline among the British troops has been an accepted facet of this encounter ever since reports began to circulate. Lieutenant Barker's personal account included damning testimony. He stated that, upon a shot or two being fired (it is unclear who actually fired first) at Lexington, the British troops rushed at an already dispersing group of militia and opened fire without orders, killing several of them. Trying to restore order proved difficult as 'the men were so wild they could hear no orders'.[53] Although it has been shown that the British army had been drilled regularly by Gage, shooting at targets is no preparation for the shock that comes when the targets shoot back. The repeated drilling of the procedure needed to load and fire muskets was intended to prepare troops for performing this relatively simple task under the intense stress of combat, but as most of the British troops at Lexington could not have taken part in a battle before, they would not have been hardened to the

[51] E.W. Emerson, ed., *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Vol. IX (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), p. 158. The quote is from 'Concord Hymn', by Ralph Waldo Emerson.
[52] S. Conway, *The War of American Independence, 1775-1783* (Edward Arnold: London, 1995), p. 20; Urban, *Fusiliers*, p. 28.
[53] Barker, *British in Boston*, pp. 31-32.

effects of receiving fire. Grossman undertook a study of combat stress and reached some revealing conclusions about its effect on a solder's ability to function. When the heart-rate tops 175 beats per minute (as might be expected when under fire for the first time), there is 'an absolute breakdown of cognitive processing'.[54] Senses begin to shut down and 'behaviour becomes inappropriately aggressive'. With respect to this, Barker's comment that his men could hear no orders was a remarkably pertinent and, in fact, literal observation. Comments from the likes of Lord Suffolk, who wrote to Germain that reports of the retreat 'don't do much credit to the discipline of our troops,'[55] suggested that at least some people believed blame for the debacle rested squarely on the soldiers. The reply from Germain, in which he criticised the planning of the march and accused Gage of inadequately training his men, sought to put the blame elsewhere as part of his preparations for taking over the running of the war and replacing Gage with Howe.[56]

Historians have tended to favour Germain's opinion. Fuller simply stated that had the light infantry operated like light infantry there would have been no problem, while Fortescue claimed the British were unprepared for the nature of combat they experienced.[57] More recently, Spring criticised British training in Boston prior to the action, claiming that only orthodox, close-order formations had been part of their drill (an assertion that is not supported by evidence, as has been shown).[58] Urban took a different view, describing how there had been no failure in tactics on the part of the British. The light infantry had been used to flank the retreating column as it returned

[54] D. Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), cited in M. Gladwell, *Blink* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 225-226.
[55] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 1, Lord Suffolk to Germain, 15 Jun. 1775.
[56] Ibid., p. 2, Germain to Lord Suffolk, 16 Jun. 1775.
[57] Fuller, *British Light Infantry*, pp. 125-127; Fortescue, *War of Independence*, pp. 4-5.
[58] Spring, *With Zeal and with Bayonets Only*, pp. 139-140.

from Concord, but had simply become exhausted and overwhelmed by large numbers of enemy militia.[59] Urban's assessment finds support in the writings of von Ewald, whose highly regarded book on light infantry tactics drew heavily on his experiences with Howe's army in America. Von Ewald asserted that flanking or skirmishing work during a retreat was exhausting and that troops needed to be rotated every hour if it was to remain effective. There is no mention of such a rotation of troops during the retreat from Concord and Fortescue reckoned the men had been on their feet for 14 hours by the time the harried column reached Lexington.[60]

That there had been indiscipline, however, is not in question. An anonymous eye-witness report confirmed that Lieutenant-Colonel Smith of the 10th Regiment, leading the initial British column, had given strict orders that they were not to fire unless fired upon.[61] The one or two shots, perhaps fired by the local militia, ought not to have triggered such a strong response. Again, having reached Lexington, where a body of militia had gathered, the witness reported Major Pitcairn, commanding six companies of light infantry, ordering his men not to fire unless ordered to do so. However, as the militia began to disperse, the light infantry rushed at them, possibly provoking the shot that triggered the excessive British response: 'Without any order or regularity, the light infantry began a scattered fire… but were silenced as soon as the authority of their officers could make them'.[62]

Indiscipline is one thing, but the charge of not acting as light infantry does not seem to be substantiated. In fact, the note of censure in the anonymous report above fails to take account of the fact that light infantry fire was not meant to have any

[59] Urban, *Fusiliers*, p. 25.
[60] Von Ewald, *A Treatise Upon the Duties of Light Troops*, p. 39; Fortescue, *War of Independence*, p. 4.
[61] *Scots Magazine*, 1 Jun. 1775, pp. 301-303.
[62] Ibid., p. 302

regularity about it; it was meant to be comprised of individual, aimed fire rather than organised volleys. Barker also referred to flanking parties being utilised as the British retreat continued from Lexington. These were not from the light infantry companies; exhausted from their morning's work, they marched at the head of the column with the equally fatigued grenadiers. Nevertheless, the makeshift flankers from the battalion companies in Percy's relief force did their job of keeping the militia at bay for a time, until the terrain they were passing through forced them to close in on the column they were protecting. The importance of flanking companies was evidently well understood and the British soldiers had been trained well enough that regular companies could tackle the duty with at least reasonable effectiveness.[63]

It therefore seems unfair to characterise the Boston garrison as a collection of ill-trained troops. They were regularly drilled, including in marksmanship and light infantry tactics. The retreat from Lexington and Concord became a near rout not because of deficiencies in the men themselves, or in their training, but simply because the British column had to march for miles under fire. As a first taste of battle, as this would have been for the majority of the British soldiers, this must have been a traumatic experience. Another account of the retreat (attributed to 'an officer of one of the flank companies'[64] and included in the published version of Mackenzie's diary) claimed that the poor performance of the British was due in part to the inexperience of the troops, adding that 'most of them were young soldiers who had never been in action'.[65]

The youth and inexperience of the British soldiers is borne out by data accumulated by Gareth William Morgan, who compiled tables of the regiments

[63] French, ed., *A British Fusilier*, p. 57.
[64] Ibid., p. 62.
[65] Ibid., p. 66.

showing age, nationality and years of service.[66] More than 68% of the Boston garrison was less than 30 years old.[67] More than a third of them (35%) had three or fewer years of service. However, there was a significant seasoning of older troops, with more than 900 men (over 15% of the garrison) having 15 years or more of service to their credit (enough, theoretically, to have allowed them to take an active part in the French and Indian War or Seven Years' War).[68] The figures do not seem out of place with general conceptions about the make-up of an army (the callow youths looking to a few grizzled veterans for reassurance is a staple of military lore), but the retreat from Concord was a particularly harsh introduction to the realities of war.

It was in the period after this baptism of fire, as militia gathered around Boston to open what became a lengthy siege and the British soldiers brooded on their first taste of war, that the *Cerberus* arrived, carrying Howe, Clinton and Burgoyne. Less than a month later (the three generals arrived on 25 May 1775), Howe led a British force against the Americans on Breed's Hill. As this was Howe's first taste of combat against the rebellious colonists, the engagement, known popularly as the Battle of Bunker Hill, has been examined in excruciating detail, and the heavy loses suffered by the British in driving the Americans from their fortifications have been cited by some as a reason for Howe's subsequent reluctance to attack the Americans when drawn up behind defensive works.[69]

The battle once more highlighted indiscipline among the British troops, notably the grenadiers and light infantry. Whereas at Concord the poor performance of the men could at least partly be attributed to their inexperience and the extreme nature of

[66] G. W. Morgan, *A Clever Little Army: The British Garrison in Boston, 1768-1776*, thesis, University of Sussex, Aug. 2004, pp. 187-188.
[67] Ibid., p. 187.
[68] Ibid., p. 188.
[69] Black, *War For America*, p. 71; Fortescue, *War of Independence,* p. 13. Fortescue wrote of Bunker Hill that 'it shook the nerve of Howe'.

the stresses they were placed under, at Bunker Hill there was more evidence of a simple lack of steadiness. It could still be argued that this stemmed initially from inexperience, but it had a more damaging effect on the course of the engagement. At Concord, the British had come close to disintegrating under pressure from the rebel militia. At Bunker Hill they were actually repulsed.[70]

Urban raised the idea that the British army in Boston was so lacking in discipline that Howe was effectively hamstrung when it came to wielding the forces at his disposal. Bunker Hill was the key element in this thesis. Drawing on personal accounts of several officers and men he painted a vivid picture of the battle, detailing how the grenadiers began their advance without orders, how troops stopped their advance to fire and thus lost momentum, and how the light infantry fell back after the rebels opened fire and then, in confusion, actually opened fire themselves on the grenadiers. The result, a shambolic mess, left the assault in turmoil and eventually resulted in shockingly high casualties.[71]

In his official report on the battle, to Gage, Howe chose his words carefully and did not make any criticism of the men he had commanded.[72] There is no reason to suspect that he was attempting to deceive his commanding officer. This official report would be the basis for Gage's own report back home (he had not taken part in the assault himself) and would thus set the tone for the official version of the battle. It is reasonable to assume that Howe's oral report would have been very different. Certainly, a letter to the Adjutant-General, Edward Harvey, back in England, was different. To Gage, Howe had written that his orders 'were executed with great

[70] Fortescue, Sir J., ed., *Correspondence of King George III, Vol. III, July 1773-December 1777*, pp. 220-224, Howe to Adjutant-General (Edward Harvey), 22 & 24 Jun. 1775; Black, *War for America*, pp. 82-84.
[71] Urban, *Fusiliers*, pp. 34-45.
[72] WCL, Thomas Gage Papers, Vol. XXX, Report of Bunker Hill, 21 Jun. 1775.

perseverance'.[73] To Harvey he added 'but not with the greatest share of discipline'.[74] Gage read how the fences between the British and the rebels had 'greatly impeded the attack by the difficulty of passing them in a very hot fire,'[75] while the more candid report told how, as soon as the grenadiers were slowed by the fence, 'they began firing, and by crowding fell into disorder'.[76] What had been intended by Howe to be an attack with bayonets had descended instead into an uneven firefight, with the rebels, safely behind their lines, inflicting high casualties and driving the British troops back.

It was the repulse of the best infantry under his command that appears to have shocked Howe the most. The 10 companies of light infantry, comprising around 300 men, and the somewhat higher (but unspecified) number of grenadiers were driven back by the Americans, causing Howe to experience 'a moment that I never felt before'.[77] Urban interpreted this as being shock at seeing his beloved light infantry fail, but it is equally possible that Howe was shocked at the indiscipline and subsequent repulse of his entire attacking force.[78]

Losses were high, especially among the officers, who suffered 92 casualties.[79] Among these was the commanding officer of the grenadiers, Lieutenant Colonel James Abercrombie of the 22nd Regiment, who was shot and killed by the British light

[73] WCL, Thomas Gage Papers, Vol. XXX, Report of Bunker Hill, 21 Jun. 1775.
[74] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence, Vol. III*, p. 222, Howe to Adjutant-General (Edward Harvey), 22 & 24 Jun. 1775.
[75] WCL, Thomas Gage Papers, Vol. XXX, Report of Bunker Hill, 21 Jun. 1775.
[76] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence, Vol. III*, p. 222, Howe to Adjutant-General (Edward Harvey), 22 & 24 Jun. 1775.
[77] Ibid., p. 222.
[78] Urban, *Fusiliers*, pp. 43.
[79] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence, Vol. III*, pp. 222-223, Howe to Adjutant-General, 22 & 24 Jun. 1775.

infantry.[80] Howe expressed his horror at the heavy toll, what he termed 'a most dreadful account,'[81] and declared that the cost of the victory had been too high. There seems to be some confusion, however, about the exact number of casualties. In his letter to the Adjutant-General, Howe detailed the 92 officers, along with about 160 men killed and 300 wounded, for a total of around 552. This is considerably fewer than the commonly accepted number of 1,054 casualties (and Fortescue pointed out that, for some reason, the casualties of the 38th Regiment were not included in the official returns, estimating them to have been at least 100).[82] Howe mentioned a further 300 men 'incapable of present duty,'[83] but not, presumably, actually wounded. It is possible that many of these were simply exhausted or too shocked by the battle to do anything but rest.

As distressing as the casualty list obviously was to Howe, the indiscipline among his soldiers must also have been a cause for concern. Losing men in an assault, however regrettable, was inevitable, but losing them due to their own indiscipline, and even to 'friendly fire', was not. Howe mentioned to Harvey that British sentries had heard the Americans at work on Breed's Hill throughout the preceding night, but had not thought to notify an officer – more evidence of a slackness in the army that would need addressing.[84] Howe's first impression of the men under his command had not been favourable, therefore, and it is interesting to note that, having been given overall

[80] NAS GD 494/1/29, Brigadier James Grant to General Harvey, cited in Urban, *Fusiliers*, p. 328. Grant wrote that 'poor Abercrombie was killed by our own men, and many of the grenadiers under his command fell by the fire of the light infantry'
[81] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence, Vol. III*, p. 222, Howe to Adjutant-General, 22 & 24 Jun. 1775.
[82] Fortescue, *War of Independence,* p. 12.
[83] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence, Vol. III*, p. 222, Howe to Adjutant-General, 22 & 24 Jun. 1775.
[84] Ibid., p. 221.

command (on 2 August 1775) and having evacuated Boston, Howe took pains to ensure all his troops were drilled at Halifax.[85]

Intriguingly, Howe had not used his light troops as might have been expected in the assault on Breed's Hill. It could be argued (as Fuller and Hew Strachan have) that he had actually used them as *heavy* troops, assaulting a prepared defensive line with bayonets.[86] Urban would argue that this was a consequence of Howe's lack of confidence in his men, or of the inadequate training they had been receiving under Gage, but is important to remember (as evidenced by the training camp in 1774) that Howe believed his light troops should be prepared to assault defensive positions.[87] It is less easy to understand why, on Breed's Hill, Howe does not appear to have employed a line of skirmishers in advance of his main force. It is uncertain exactly how much input Howe had in the plan of attack, or how far he amended the plan after landing his troops and finding the American position was substantially stronger than expected (he certainly called for reinforcements).[88] It is, however, reasonable to suggest that his input would have been extensive, and that he would (or at least should) have pointed out any faults in the plan while it was under discussion; he was, after all, going to command it. Howe made no allusion to any dissatisfaction with that plan in any of his reports, and far from lacking in confidence in his flank companies, the plan enacted by Howe demonstrated that he had every confidence in them. The

[85] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 215-216, Dartmouth to Howe, 2 Aug. 1775.
[86] Fuller, *British Light Infantry*, p. 127; H. Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (e-publication: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005), p. 28.
[87] Urban, *Fusiliers*, pp. 34-45.
[88] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence, Vol. III*, p. 221, Howe to Adjutant-General, 22 & 24 Jun. 1775.

grenadiers and lights were to break the American left flank, with line companies merely following up to exploit the initial success.[89]

The distressing experience of Bunker Hill does appear to have had an effect on Howe, but perhaps not in the manner often claimed. Authorities including Mackesy and Fortescue have claimed that it affected Howe's willingness to send his men into battle.[90] However, the British commander remained willing to take decisive action, but he took account of the indiscipline of his still-inexperienced army in his planning. This was demonstrated clearly when the Americans occupied another patch of high ground and threatened the British with a second Bunker Hill. The failure of the British to occupy the Dorchester Heights (which was just as threatening to their position in Boston as Breed's Hill), is puzzling, especially as Howe recognised instantly the need to drive the Americans away once they themselves had belatedly moved men onto it, during the night of 4 March 1776. In his report to Lord Dartmouth, Howe claimed that the enthusiasm of his troops had encouraged him to launch an assault as quickly as possible, but his orderly book showed a somewhat different frame of mind.[91] No doubt mindful of the indiscipline that had proved so costly on Breed's Hill, Howe ordered his light infantry and grenadiers not to load their muskets for the assault on the Dorchester Heights. This time, clearly, he was determined that they should attack with bayonets only, as he had intended in the earlier engagement.[92] It is also clear

[89] WCL, Thomas Gage Papers, Vol. XXX, Report of Bunker Hill, 21 Jun. 1775. Howe explained how the grenadier and light companies formed the first line of assaulting troops, with the line companies of the 5th and 38th Regiments in the second line and the 43rd and 52nd in the third.
[90] Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 93. In describing Howe's taking of Fort Washington, Mackesy commented that 'no memory of Bunker Hill deterred him', acknowledging the conventional opinion that the battle affected his conduct throughout the war; Fortescue, *War of Independence*, p. 13.
[91] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 87-92, Howe to Dartmouth, 21 Mar. 1776.
[92] Stevens, ed., *Orderly Book*, p. 225, 5 Mar. 1776.

that, in his letter to Dartmouth, Howe was again protecting the reputation of his men and masking his own doubts, a recurring theme.

Bad weather prevented the assault from being made and gave time for the Americans to strengthen their position and bring up cannon, to the point where Howe thought it too hazardous to risk an attack.[93] The British position in Boston was now untenable, as the Americans would be able to shell the city from their new positions. Having long desired to get out of the uncomfortable and rather undignified position of being under siege to the rebel army, Howe was finally forced to do so, even though there were insufficient transport ships for an orderly withdrawal. On 17 March the British left Boston, despite the difficulties encountered due to the shortage of shipping and the number of loyalists who had no intention of remaining behind. The disorganised withdrawal was certainly one reason why a direct move to New York was not made, but by going instead to Halifax, Howe would be able to restore some order, enjoy a respite from the stresses of life under siege and, most importantly, drill his men.[94]

Training under Howe

Howe had begun the process of reorganising his elite troops while still at Boston. In July 1775 he had appointed Lieutenant-Colonel Agnew, Major Smelt and Major Mitchell to command the grenadiers (due to ill-health, Smelt was replaced in October by Major Dilkes), while Lieutenant-Colonel Clark, Major Butler and Major Musgrave were placed in charge of the light infantry.[95] Howe had also ordered musket practice

[93] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 87-92, Howe to Dartmouth, 21 Mar. 1776.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Stevens, ed., *Orderly Book*, p. 52, 25 Jul. 1775; Ibid., p. 125, 31 Oct. 1775;

(again, the term 'firing at marks'[96] reveals that targets were used) for recruits and new drafts, adding that all soldiers could be given such practice if their respective commanders felt it necessary. Allowance had also been made for the local conditions – the fact that the British would be fighting on broken ground with many obstacles, rather than sweeping across open battlefields. Howe ordered that, when in line, the men should leave an 18-inch gap between files, giving them more room to negotiate obstacles without crowding and causing disorder.[97] This was still six inches closer than even the tightest light infantry intervals specified at Salisbury, but it shows Howe's awareness that even regular infantry needed to adjust to the terrain they would be moving over.

The winter in Boston had been a miserable one. Fresh provisions had been largely limited to the sick and wounded since at least July, and only the more seriously ill were allowed 'the small assistance of fresh meet that can be provided from time to time'.[98] Clearly, a cold, hungry winter in Boston (an outbreak of smallpox had added to the misery) was not going to improve the condition of the troops, but once safely transferred to Halifax, Howe embarked on an organised schedule of drilling to bring the men to a better state of readiness for battle.[99] This should not be mistaken for a gruelling regimen of daily drill, however. Troops remained on their transports for most of the time while the army was at Halifax and

[96] Stevens, ed., *Orderly Book*, p. 201, 20 Jan. 1776.
[97] Ibid., p. 222, 29 Feb. 1776.
[98] Ibid., p. 50, 22 Jul. 1775.
[99] Ibid., p. 77, 25 Aug. 1775. This entry remarks that wood is not available 'but at an extravagant price'; Ibid., p. 156, 1 Dec, 1775. Although inoculation against Smallpox was recommended, this entry makes it clear that it was not compulsory.

were ferried to land only when ordered for work or to drill. Apart from this, just about the only way a soldier could get ashore was to die.[100]

Howe's orderly book detailed each regular regiment being given one day of organised drill during the entire period at Halifax, under the supervision of Percy. Three regiments at a time were put through their paces, on 15, 18, 20, 22, 26 and 27 April 1776.[101] The grenadier companies were drilled separately, in two groups (one group including two battalions of marines) but each also received just one day of training.[102] The importance of the light infantry was underlined by the fact that they were drilled in groups on four separate days (13, 15, 22 and 27 April), but even so, each individual company only received two days of training.[103] Major Musgrave commanded the drilling of both the grenadiers and the light infantry, so if the men weren't rigorously exercised, he at least was. On three occasions, Howe ordered corps, companies or regiments to parade one or two days after drilling. In this way one of the grenadier corps and both light infantry corps received an extra opportunity to hone their skills.[104] After this flurry of organised drill, taking up the second half of April, it was left to the commanding officers of each regiment to exercise their men as they saw fit.[105]

Following this brief period of reorganisation, Howe arranged his grenadiers and light infantry into four battalions.[106] The 18 light infantry companies were evenly divided into two battalions, while the 18 grenadier companies were joined by the two

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[100] W. Bamford, 'The Revolutionary Diary of a British Officer', *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 27 (1932), p. 253; Stevens, ed., *Orderly Book*, p. 256, 21 Apr. 1776.
[101] Stevens, ed., *Orderly Book*, p. 251, 13 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 254, 17 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 256, 19 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 256, 20 Apr. 1776; p. 258, 25 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 260, 26 Apr. 1776.
[102] Ibid., p. 254, 17 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 256, 19 Apr. 1776;
[103] Ibid., p. 251, 12 Apr 1776; Ibid., p. 252, 14 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 256, 20 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 260, 26 Apr. 1776.
[104] Ibid., p. 253, 15 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 255, 18 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 257, 22 Apr. 1776.
[105] Ibid., p. 261, 30 Apr. 1776.
[106] Ibid., pp. 272-273, 14 May 1776.

battalions of marines who had been drilled with them. Once more, it is important not to overestimate the level of organisation. Although the grenadier and light infantry companies had been exercised in groups, the composition of the four battalions took no account of who had trained alongside whom while at Halifax. The companies were allocated in strictly numerical order, so at least some of any camaraderie or cohesion built up during those precious days of drill was lost.[107] The drill sessions on Halifax would not have raised the light infantry battalions to the perfect pitch described by Smith in *An Historical Account of Bouquet's Expedition*, but Howe simply did not have the luxury of steadily honing his men's skills, and these small measures would have to suffice.[108]

The campaign of 1776

Howe did not launch his 1776 offensive until 27 August, more than five months after leaving Boston and more than 14 months since the last military action against the main rebel army, on Breed's Hill. There were various logistical reasons for the delay, but it is important to consider whether any doubts over the battle-readiness of his army also factored into Howe's decision-making. While at Halifax, Howe was aware of worrying intelligence regarding enemy activity in New York. The rebel general Charles Lee (a former British officer and therefore respected, if also reviled as a turncoat) was reported to be entrenching the city from as early as 10 February, 1776.[109] Later intelligence suggested the work included a battery on Long Island to

[107] Ibid., pp. 272-273, 14 May 1776. For instance, the light companies of the 5th, 10th, 23rd, 38th, 43rd, 52nd, 55th and 63rd Regiments drilled together on 15 April 1776, yet they were split when the battalion arrangements were announced, the first four companies entering the 1st Battalion and the second four entering the 2nd.
[108] Smith, *Bouquet's Expedition*, pp. 107-116.
[109] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 110-111, Intelligence from Philadelphia, 10 Feb. 1776.

protect the section of the East River known as 'Hell's Gate', and further batteries were under construction.[110] Howe had learned to respect the Americans' abilities when it came to throwing up formidable fortifications, sometimes overnight, and would have realised that the taking of New York would need to be planned carefully.

This led to a peculiar disjunction between Howe's written correspondence and his actions, which was to prove frustrating for the politicians at home, waiting for news of a decisive victory over the rebel army. Howe was searching for a decisive battle, 'than which nothing is more to be desired or sought for by us, as the most effective means to terminate this expensive war'.[111] He declared that, 'Should the enemy offer battle in the open field we must not decline it'[112] and later admitted that 'I am still of opinion that peace will not be restored in America until the rebel army is defeated'.[113] These appear to be the words of a general in bullish mood, but on considering that the letters quoted were from 25 April, 7 June and 7 July, respectively, they take on a different complexion, that of a man repeatedly failing to back up his words with actions. Howe's desire to have the large numbers of reinforcements he had been promised was understandable, but had he considered his men greatly superior to the rebel soldiers he might have been expected to move more quickly. In his letter of 7 June, he claimed that his men were in such condition that they would be sure to prevail if the rebels risked a battle (more evidence of his desire to protect the reputation of his soldiers), but it was certainly not only the British forces that were

[110] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 114-115, Captain Parker to Shuldham (Admiral), New York, 25 Feb. 1776.
[111] Ibid., ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776.
[112] Ibid., ff. 208-211, Howe to Germain, 7 Jun. 1776.
[113] Ibid., ff. 214-216, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1776.

being strengthened during the delay. The more time the Americans had, the stronger their defences were likely to be.[114]

Having arrived at Sandy Hook on 25 June, Howe lapsed into a period of seeming inactivity. It must be remembered, however, that his men had been largely confined to their transports for the preceding three months (Boston having been evacuated on March 17 and Halifax having insufficient buildings to accommodate the men on land). A period of recuperation was essential for the men to gather their strength, but it is also clear that Howe was swayed by intelligence on the American defences to adopt a less aggressive strategy than he had originally proposed.[115] Having consulted with Governor Tryon and other loyalists, Howe was made aware that the rebels had strong entrenchments on both Manhattan and Long Island, with more than 100 cannon. The Americans were also in possession of a ridge of high ground on Long Island known as the Heights of Guan, or the Gowanus Heights. This knowledge prompted Howe to land his troops on Staten Island, rather than at Gravesend Bay on Long Island itself, as he had originally planned.

On 6 August, Howe informed Germain that, having received enough reinforcements to act (though not yet all of them), he was now awaiting delivery of camp equipment, especially kettles and canteens, before moving onto the offensive.[116] This might seem like a rather weak excuse for his inactivity, but in fact it was prudent given the climate the European troops would be operating in. High heat and humidity posed grave risks to the health of unseasoned troops and although eighteenth-century medical science had few answers to camp illnesses, the benefits of giving the soldiers the means to cook their meals properly were recognised. Howe had also been present

[114] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 116-120, Germain to Howe, 3May 1776.
[115] Ibid., ff. 214-216, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1776.
[116] Ibid., ff. 228-230, Howe to Germain, 6 Aug. 1776.

at the British expedition against Havana in 1762 and had witnessed what disease and a harsh climate could do to a concentrated group of Europeans. At one point during that operation, no fewer than 8,000 soldiers and sailors were ill.[117] Chief among the problems at Havana, however, was the presence of deadly tropical diseases, which were not a factor at New York.

The extenuating circumstances behind Howe's slowness to move were undermined somewhat when, upon the arrival of the first wave of Hessians on 12 August, he claimed that they were in good condition despite many weeks at sea and that he would now move quickly. It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that it was not questions over the fitness of his men after their long period confined on ships that had been Howe's major concern, but the size of his force.[118]

In the event, whatever the reasons were for Howe's caution about moving his men onto Long Island, they proved groundless – the landing was completely unopposed. In what was to become a recurring theme, Howe had apparently over-estimated the Americans, calling to mind the veiled criticism levelled at him by Bancroft after the Battle of Long Island, in which he wrote that 'The plan of attack by General Howe was as elaborate as if he had had to encounter an equal army.'[119] The soldiers under Howe took note of the apparent naivety of the rebels, commenting that it was a mistake not to have made the British suffer during the landings both at Staten Island and Long Island.[120]

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[117] D. Greentree, *A Far-Flung Gamble, Havana 1762*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), p. 56.
[118] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 247-248, Germain to Howe, 15 Aug. 1776.
[119] Bancroft, *History of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1875), p. 87.
[120] E. J. Lowell, *The Hessians and the Other German Auxiliaries of Great Britain in the Revolutionary War* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1884), p. 60.

Whether Howe's caution stemmed from misgivings about his men's discipline, or if he was merely revealing his essentially cautious nature as a commander, is impossible to tell for certain, but his planning for the eventual assault on Long Island did not suggest any concerns with the fighting abilities of his army; Howe appears to have been contemplating an assault on the rebel positions along the Gowanus Heights. It is not clear what his exact plan had been, but when Clinton suggested a long flanking march to get behind the rebel lines, it appears that Howe was initially reluctant to adopt it, suggesting that he had a more direct approach in mind.[121] The strength of the American positions may have caused Howe to think again (if he was impressed by the positions along the Gowanus Heights, he was not alone; a Hessian soldier wrote that the rebels had 'a very advantageous position… and we had a very bad one'[122]) and he eventually accepted Clinton's plan, one of the rare occasions on which he did so.[123]

When the assault began on 27 August, the same Hessian who had noted the strength of the rebel position recorded that resistance crumbled quickly and the Americans simply ran away, 'as all mobs do'.[124] At the same time, there were further examples of British indiscipline, which strengthens the argument that Howe may have been uncertain about the steadiness of the army under his command. The Hessian colonel von Heeringen said that most of the British casualties on Long Island (Howe reported 318 killed and wounded) were due 'more to their disorderly attack than to the valour of the enemy'.[125] His criticism, however, seems harsh, as the bulk of the British casualties were suffered on the left flank, during a diversionary attack by

[121] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f.5, Clinton's plan of attack for Long Island, 25 Aug. 1776; Willcox, *Portrait of a General*, p. 105.
[122] Lowell, *The Hessians*, p. 64.
[123] Willcox, *Portrait of a General*, pp. 105-106.
[124] Lowell, *The Hessians*, p. 60.
[125] Ibid., p. 66.

troops under Major General James Grant in which he had been ordered not to press the Americans too strongly. With his hands tied, casualties were inevitably higher than they would have been had he exploited his early advantage, which had seen him gain possession of a pass through the Gowanus Heights with very little effort and at very little cost.[126]

There was, however, a very serious example of British indiscipline that may well have caused Howe to cast his mind back to the Battle of Bunker Hill. Having sent the Americans scrambling back to the safety of their lines on the Brooklyn Heights, a body of troops under Brigadier General John Vaughan proceeded to exceed their orders and storm one of the redoubts that comprised the Americans' second line of defence. Howe's orders for the battle have not survived, but in Clinton's own account he makes it clear that he knew full well that the attack was not to be pressed following the initial attempt to shift the American forces off the Gowanus Heights. 'I must confess,' Clinton wrote, 'that (notwithstanding I knew the Commander in Chief's wishes) I had permitted this move.'[127]

Confusion surrounds this moment of impetuousness. Howe's description of it in his report to Germain following the battle, and his subsequent detailed explanation during the Howe Inquiry, only made things more muddled. As one of the key moments of controversy in Howe's career, this episode has been thoroughly raked over by historians, many of whom have been especially interested in the strength of the rebel lines and the numbers of men defending them.[128] Although that is a fascinating debating point, it is perhaps more important to consider that, from Howe's

[126] H. P. Johnston, *The Campaign of 1776 Around New York and Brooklyn* (New Jersey: Scholar's Bookshelf, 2005), pp. 161-173.
[127] Wilcox, ed., *The American Rebellion*, p. 43.
[128] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, p. 38; Stephenson, *Patriot Battles*, p. 240; Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 88; Griffith, *War for American Independence*, p. 307.

point of view, this was the second time he had led his men into battle, and the second time they had exceeded their orders. Moreover, the troops that allowed their enthusiasm to provoke them into a reckless assault were, once more, the grenadiers. Following the disastrous results of their indiscipline on Breed's Hill, this must have been galling for Howe, and he must have been further annoyed at having to issue repeated orders to withdraw from their unauthorised attack before they complied.[129]

Clinton claimed that his indulgence of the grenadiers stemmed from a belief that the American position could be overrun completely by the storming of the redoubt in question. He believed that the British would then be able to march down to Brooklyn Ferry and thus trap the entire corps of rebels. That may indeed have been the case, but it was not a decision to be taken by the grenadiers. Howe's decision to restrain his men appears perfectly reasonable, especially considering his experience on Breed's Hill. The suggestion that his will to fight had somehow been shaken by the high cost of that battle does not appear to be borne out by subsequent events, but he had seen what an undisciplined attack could lead to and understandably had no wish to see it repeated.[130]

Following the victory on Long Island and subsequent evacuation of American forces on the night of 29 August, Howe moved his men onto Manhattan, where a further episode of indiscipline occurred. The Battle of Harlem Heights (16 September 1776) was in reality merely a skirmish that escalated and gave the rebel troops the satisfaction of seeing British regulars forced to retreat. Again, it was the light infantry that had acted without the proper caution and Howe gently reproved his men in

[129] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.
[130] Wilcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 43-44.

general orders, criticising the 'want of attention in the light company's pursuing the rebels.'[131]

Although Howe's mild words in this context must be treated with caution (he was unlikely to risk undermining his men's morale by issuing a stern rebuke in the middle of a campaign), he also made several comments about his confidence in his troops, noting their 'evident superiority'[132] to the enemy and praising the 'prevailing spirit of the army'.[133] The issue of indiscipline, however, would not go away, and some of Howe's orders take on the tone of a disapproving parent. On 15 October he chastised his sentries for exchanging fire with their rebel counterparts, claiming that it betrayed unsteadiness, while on 24 October he again mixed praise with criticism, noting that the behaviour of the Hessian Jägers, while spirited, had been reckless and had led to unnecessary casualties.[134]

Howe appears to have been more disappointed with his men than a reading of these mild admonishments would suggest. Lieutenant Loftus Cliffe, in Howe's former regiment, the 46th, gave tantalising hints of the general's feelings in letters home from New York. After the Battle of Harlem Heights, Cliffe claimed that Howe was angry and especially displeased with Brigadier-General Alexander Leslie, who led British and Hessian troops in the battle.[135] Howe's displeasure apparently stemmed from the fact that so much had been gained up to that point at such a low cost. The casualties from this disorganised, unstructured skirmish (Cliffe estimated 12 or 13 dead and 140 wounded, while official returns put the losses slightly higher, at 14 dead and 154 wounded) were seen by Howe as totally unnecessary. Cliffe reported that Howe felt

[131] WCL, *William Howe Orderly Book*, 17 Sep. 1776.
[132] Ibid., 13 Sep. 1776.
[133] Ibid., 17 Sep. 1776.
[134] Ibid., 15 Oct. 1776; 24 Oct. 1776.
[135] WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers, Loftus Cliffe to Jack Cliffe, Camp on New York Island, 21 Sep. 1776.

this was 'the severest blow we have yet felt'.[136] Howe's concern for the safety of his men comes through in this letter, with Cliffe writing that Howe had declared he was determined not to suffer unnecessary casualties. There was also a personal element to Howe's concerns over this skirmish. 'General Howe has been a good deal hurt at this,' wrote Cliffe, '… he says he did not deserve it.' Howe was so displeased that he took steps to ensure this type of escalating engagement would not happen again, ordering pickets not to allow officers or men to pass them (unless, presumably, they had written authorisation, although this was not specified in Cliffe's letter).[137]

For the first time, a plausible argument can be made that Howe now felt uncertain about committing his army to battle given its repeated lapses in discipline. Having seen them act impetuously on Breed's Hill, Long Island and the Harlem Heights, he made no further move for a month and, when he did, he turned to his brother's ships to attempt an outflanking of the Americans, rather than assaulting yet more prepared defensive positions. It would be going too far to suggest that Howe felt his men could not be relied upon to defeat the enemy (there is no evidence to suggest he ever doubted his troops would prevail in battle), but he was painfully aware of the need to keep casualties to an absolute minimum. The disaster at Breed's Hill, the needless losses at Harlem Heights and the possibility that more heavy losses had been narrowly avoided on Long Island must have factored into his plans for the remainder of the campaign. Even before the landing on Long Island he had referred to his army as 'the stock upon which the national force in America must in future be grafted'[138] and he was not alone in recognising the need to limit casualties; Lord Percy had

[136] WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers, Loftus Cliffe to Jack Cliffe, Camp on New York Island, 21 Sep. 1776.
[137] Ibid.
[138] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 228-230, Howe to Germain, 6 Aug. 1776.

famously claimed, while still at Boston, that the British could not even afford a victory if it was accompanied by any significant loss of men.[139]

It is equally possible, however, to read Howe's refusal to attack the Americans in their prepared defensive works on Manhattan as prudent generalship. By refusing to fight the rebels on their own terms, and by simply shifting his own army via the East River, he was able to force them to vacate their works without suffering any casualties at all. This was not lost on his men. Back on Long Island, Cliffe had noted that Howe was not willing simply to 'run our heads against their works, which is what they have all along hoped for'.[140] Howe himself would later give the clearest indication of his personal thoughts on the subject during his narrative, when he stated:

> I do not hesitate to confess, that if I could by any manoeuvre remove an enemy from a very advantageous position, without hazarding the consequences of an attack, where the point to be carried was not adequate to the loss of men to be expected from the enterprise, I should certainly adopt that cautionary conduct, in the hopes of meeting my adversary upon more equal terms.[141]

It is telling, however, that in the remaining two actions of the 1776 campaign, at White Plains and at Fort Washington, Howe ordered the Hessians to bear the brunt of the fighting, and they consequently took the majority of the casualties for the remainder of the year. It was also the Hessians who were placed in the most exposed position in the line of posts adopted at the close of the campaign, at Trenton.

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[139] C. K. Bolton, ed., *Letters of Hugh Earl Percy from Boston and New York 1774-1776* (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1902), p. 58, Percy to General Harvey, 28 Jul. 1775.
[140] WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers, Loftus Cliffe to Jack Cliffe, Camp on New York Island, 21 Sep. 1776.
[141] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 7.

The Hessians

Consideration of the part played by the Hessian contingent of the British army has tended to focus on the mechanics of the treaties negotiated for their hire.[142] Where their skill as soldiers has been considered, their reputation as merciless and cruel fighters has received the most attention. They were viewed with something approaching dread by the Americans; 'A reputation for both skill and savagery preceded these mercenaries,'[143] noted Barnet Schecter. The German states had a long tradition of hiring out their men for active service under foreign powers, yet Howe had concerns about the quality of the men who would make up such a substantial part of his force.[144] He initially felt that Russians would have been preferable, but he still wrote to Dartmouth (while at Boston at the end of 1775) to suggest that Hanoverians and Hessians be mixed in with new British troops, obviously feeling that this would add a little experience to the ranks of recruits.[145]

Howe expressed more explicit concern over the officers who would be leading the German troops. Feeling that their commitment to the cause might be questionable (a reasonable concern given that they had no connection with Britain), he suggested that a bonus might be offered to them, reliant upon the report of the British commander-in-chief. Howe also asked to be informed of the 'characters and dispositions'[146] of the senior officers that were to accompany the German troops. No evidence exists that any such bonus was offered to the Hessian commanders (and they

[142] Stephenson, *Patriot Battles*, pp. 48-52; Griffith, *War for American Independence*, pp. 261-262, Schecter, *Battle for New York*, pp. 92-93.
[143] Schecter, *Battle for New York*, p. 93.
[144] Childs, 'The Army and the State in Britain and Germany', pp. 63-64.
[145] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XV, f. 10, Howe to Clinton, 12 Apr. 1776; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 321-326, Howe to Dartmouth, 26 Nov. 1775.
[146] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 30, Howe to Germain, 26 Apr. 1776.

might have considered it insulting if it had), but Germain did write back to reassure Howe that the foreign generals would be cooperative with him.[147]

Germain's confidence appears to have been misplaced in the case of the Hessians' overall commander, Lieutenant General Philip von Heister. Howe and von Heister seem to have endured a strained relationship from the start, when the Hessian commander insisted his men needed time to recover from their Atlantic crossing before embarking on active duty.[148] This was not an unreasonable request, but Howe was beginning to feel pressure as the campaigning season ticked away and Germain waited impatiently in Britain for news of the first blow against the rebels. Howe compared von Heister's attitude with that of the Guards division (who arrived with the first wave of Hessians), who had professed themselves ready to move as soon as they had landed. This was not entirely fair as the Hessians had already endured a lengthy journey before embarking with the Guards in Britain. The Hessian commander, described by Howe's aide de camp, Captain Friedrich von Muenchhausen, as 'a stiff and completely militarily minded general,'[149] appears to have been a poor match temperamentally for Howe, who disliked formality (as his comment to Clinton, on finding the term 'deference' to be hurtful to him, demonstrated).[150] Von Muenchhausen also reported that von Heister was unused to the diplomacy necessary when working alongside another general.[151]

The very presence of von Muenchhausen as Howe's aide-de-camp adds further detail to the relationship between Howe and von Heister. Not appointed until 18

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[147] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 36, Germain to Howe, 9 Jun. 1776.
[148] Ibid., p. 39, Howe to Germain, 13 Aug. 1776.
[149] F. von Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side, 1776-1778* (Monmouth Beach, N.J.: Philip Freneau Press, 1974), p. 62.
[150] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 26, Memo of conversation with Howe, 6 Jul. 1777.
[151] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 62.

November 1776, he became an indispensible link between the two generals, who did not share a common language (von Heister spoke French and German, Howe spoke only English, while von Muenchhausen was fluent in all three languages).[152] It seems incredible that prior to this, and during engagements on Long Island and White Plains, Howe and von Heister had been unable to converse with each other on plans. Howe's orders had required translating before they were handed to von Heister, which had led to delay, and the German commander mentioned that he had often received oral and written English orders that he did not understand.[153]

Howe's relationship with von Heister steadily deteriorated to the point where Howe demanded his removal, but there were no such problems with the Hessian soldiers themselves.[154] In fact, the Hessian Jägers almost instantly established themselves as the elite troops under Howe's command. Their quality enabled them to undertake the classic light infantry duties so necessary in the American terrain. Time and again in diaries of the war, mention is made of the Jäger companies spearheading marching columns, with the British light infantry taking a position behind them.[155]

Von Muenchhausen was unimpressed with the British officers he had to work alongside. Aside from Howe (whom he claimed to like personally) he found the British arrogant and was determined never again to serve with an English general, but, at least among senior British officers, there seems to have been a genuine respect for their German comrades. Howe repeatedly praised the work of the Hessians, especially the Jägers, in general orders, while Clinton was described as 'a great friend to the

[152]Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 2.
[153] Ibid., p. 5.
[154] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 54, Howe to Germain, 31 Dec. 1776.
[155] J. P. Tustin, ed., *Diary of the American War: A Hessian Journal, Captain Johann Ewald* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 10, 11 & 27; B. A. Uhlendorf, *Revolution in America: Confidential Letters and Journals, 1776-1784, of Adjutant General Major Baurmeister of the Hessian Forces* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1957), p. 63.

Germans'.[156] Cornwallis showed his generous nature when promising to secure provisions and new uniforms for a bedraggled Jäger corps after the 1776 campaign. The uniforms, one for each soldier at Cornwallis's expense, duly arrived on 23 January 1777.[157]

The Hessians initially played a supporting role in operations, although there is no evidence that this was due to any misgivings on the part of Howe. The centrepiece of the battle plan on Long Island (the extensive night march to outflank the Americans on the Gowanus Heights) was undertaken entirely by British troops, while the diversionary assault from Major General James Grant, on the American right flank, was likewise an exclusively British affair. The Hessians merely held their position in the centre of the line and advanced only after the signal of two cannon shots signified that Howe's column had reached Bedford, in the Americans' rear. The Hessians were more involved in the next major operation, the invasion of Manhattan. For the landing at Kip's Bay, Howe selected his light infantry, the Hessian Jägers and Hessian grenadiers, but the landing was entirely unopposed as the opening naval barrage forced the Americans to abandon their defensive lines. It was therefore not until White Plains that the Hessians had any serious fighting, against a well-prepared enemy, and it was here that the greatest falling out between Howe and von Heister occurred.[158]

From its faltering start, the relationship between the two had steadily worsened. Following the Battle of Long Island, Howe had ordered the American fortifications at

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[156] B. E. Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary of the American Revolution, by Johann Conrad Döhla* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), p. 52

[157] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 52; Baurmeister, *Revolution in America*, pp. 99. & 103; Burgoyne, ed., *A Hessian Diary*, p. 49; Tustin, ed., *Diary of the American War*, p. 52.

[158] Uhlendorf, *Revolution in America*, p. 48; Willcox, ed., *The American Rebellion*, p. 46; D. H. Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 104.

Brooklyn to be razed, but von Heister refused to let his men undertake the work unless they were paid extra; Howe cancelled the order.[159] A new Jäger contingent arrived in America in October 1776, but when their first action drew a sharp rebuke from von Heister (he believed they had acted recklessly), Howe let it be known to their commanding officer that he approved of their conduct, even though he made a mild criticism in general orders.[160] Having seen how Howe had previously been disappointed by (and even censured) his own men's indiscipline, it seems reasonable to suggest that his actions here were as much an effort to contradict von Heister as to signify genuine approval for over-zealous conduct.

By the time British and Hessian forces arrived to confront Washington's army at White Plains, on 28 October, the two men were clearly not working well together. The conventional account of what happened next is that Howe ordered an assault on a hill on the American's right flank. Chatterton's Hill was detached from the main American defences, with the Bronx River flowing between them, and a frontal assault from British and Hessian troops, together with a flanking attack from further Hessian units, drove the Americans from their positions. There is great controversy about what happened next, which was nothing. Howe's apparent refusal to launch a general assault on the American lines has been seized on as evidence of his unimaginative and overly cautious nature, and when speaking in his own defence, at the parliamentary inquiry of 1779, he failed to put the matter to rest, stating only that he had intended to attack and was unwilling to give his reasons why the attack did not take place. The 'political reasons'[161] Howe claimed to have for not revealing what had happened at White Plains have proved a puzzling issue for historians. Fortescue simply mentioned

[159] Uhlendorf, *Revolution in America*, p. 46.
[160] Tustin, ed., *Diary of the American War*, pp. 9-10; WCL, *William Howe Orderly Book*, 24 Oct. 1776.
[161] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 6-7.

it, but offered no explanation.[162] Anderson proposed that Howe had come into possession of the plans for a rebel stronghold on Manhattan, Fort Washington, and considered this a more tempting target (in this unlikely scenario, the conspiracy theory runs that Howe did not want to reveal the name of his informant).[163]

New evidence presented by the draft of Howe's narrative, however, casts entirely new light on the events at White Plains. In this earlier draft, Howe included a paragraph that adds greatly to our understanding of his failing relationship with von Heister. Headlined 'In addition to White Plains', Howe wrote:

> The assault being intended upon the enemy's right, which was opposite to the Hessian troops, I purposed the attack to General Heister, whose consent I could not obtain and on that account it was deferred. I mentioned General Heister's dissent to General Clinton and my intention of making it with the British under his direction.[164]

Doubts about the possibility of this being a misunderstanding or a case of miscommunication (this occurred before von Muenchhausen was appointed aide-de-camp) would seem to be dispelled by Howe's deliberate use of the word 'dissent'. It appears that von Heister flatly refused to lead the assault that Howe desired. By the end of the campaign, Howe was insisting to Germain that von Heister be recalled.[165] In fact, he stated that both von Heister and the second-in-command, Lieutenant-General Wilhelm von Knyphausen, were too old for the duties they were required to undertake (they were 69 and 60 years of age, respectively), although he went on to say that he at least believed von Knyphausen was a willing commander. Von Heister was, in Howe's words, 'exceedingly unsteady and so entirely averse to carry the

[162] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, pp. 42-43.
[163] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, pp. 193-194.
[164] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 21.
[165] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 54, Howe to Germain, 31 Dec. 1776.

Hessians into action, I must be very anxious for his removal'.[166] Following the arrival of von Heister's recall orders at the end of June 1777, Howe made an 'unpleasant visit'[167] to the outgoing Hessian commander, with whom he had not spoken for several days. The pair clearly parted on bad terms and von Heister died shortly after returning home, apparently a broken man.

Von Knyphausen proved his zeal for the service during the assault on Fort Washington, which followed events at White Plains. Leading the Hessian forces that carried out the main assault, he is reported as having led from the front, tearing down obstructions with his bare hands. The fort was renamed Fort Knyphausen following its fall and there appears to have been a much warmer relationship between Howe and von Knyphausen, which was noted by the Hessian troops with satisfaction.[168]

However, the Hessians did not perform well during the disastrous affair at Trenton, which closed the year. After driving Washington's evaporating army across the Delaware, Howe set up a string of posts to hold New Jersey for the winter. Believing that the strong loyalist element in the region deserved protection, he risked a lengthier chain of posts than prudence might have suggested, admitting in a letter to Germain that the chain was 'rather too extensive'.[169] Washington launched a surprise attack on Trenton, at the extreme left of the British line, and captured the entire Hessian garrison, undoing much of the good work undertaken by Howe's army in the 1776 campaign and breathing new life and belief into the Patriot cause. Howe was criticised for not placing British units in this important post, but in his narrative he pointed out that, as the Hessians' position in the line was the left flank, they would

[166] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 54, Howe to Germain, 31 Dec. 1776.
[167] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 20.
[168] Uhlendorf, *Revolution in America*, p. 100.
[169] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 16-18, Howe to Germain, 20 Dec. 1776.

have seen the left-most posts as their rightful place and would have been disgraced if British troops had been placed there instead.[170]

Stating that he effectively had no alternative when it came to placing the Hessians at Trenton could be viewed as rather lukewarm support, and Howe also went on in his narrative to claim that the garrison should have been able to defend the post successfully, having been given ample warning that an enemy attack was imminent. Howe did not, however, take the easy option and simply blame the Hessians entirely. In correspondence with Germain, Howe had been more openly critical of the Hessian commanders, accusing Rall of misconduct and also criticising Colonel von Donop, but in his narrative, he pointed out that they had performed well in the campaign up to that point and especially noted how effective they had been during the attack on Fort Washington.[171] In the draft of his narrative, however, a nugget of new information is revealed – the fact that one of the units at Trenton was in fact a garrison battalion and therefore not as experienced as others. In the draft, Howe argued that this regiment had also performed well at Fort Washington, but in the revised version, as delivered to the House of Commons, any reference to their being a garrison battalion had been removed.[172]

The loss of Trenton must have been frustrating to Howe, but there is no evidence that it soured his opinion of the Hessian troops in general, at least not in terms of their fighting ability. Relationships between Hessian and British forces appear to have been rather cool, with occasional critical comments appearing in letters and journals. Loftus Cliffe, for instance, noted that the Hessians tended to be wasteful

[170] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of King George III*, p. 421, George III to Lord North, 24 Feb. 1777; Howe, *Narrative*, p. 8.
[171] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 53, Howe to Germain, 31 Dec. 1776; Howe, *Narrative*, p. 8.
[172] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, ff. 19-20.

of resources, slaughtering milk cows for meat and thus depriving the army of a source of milk and butter, as well as indiscriminately pillaging civilian houses.[173] There does not appear to have been much intermingling between officers of the British and German units; at a meal in July 1777, Howe entertained 55 British officers and not a single German.[174] However, just prior to the fall of Trenton, Howe had laid out his plans for the 1777 campaign, requesting reinforcements including 15,000 foreign troops from Russia, Hanover or other German states, so he must have been satisfied with their quality. Reinforcements on that scale were never likely, and those that did come out to America in 1777 and 1778 were of a steadily worsening quality (according to Ewald they were deserters and riff-raff in 1777 and had degenerated into 'the scum of the earth'[175] by 1778), suggesting that this was a source that had been largely exhausted. Howe's request for reinforcements opens up an entirely different question, and an entirely different way of judging the army under his command – its size.

The size of Howe's army

The quality of the fighting men under Howe's command is obviously a crucial consideration when passing any sort of judgement on his period in command, but it is also necessary to consider whether or not he had enough troops with which to carry out his plans. Arguments could go back and forth over how many men Howe actually would have needed to subdue the rebellion, but a far more productive line of enquiry

[173] WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers, Loftus Cliffe to Bartholomew Cliffe, Camp on New York Island, 21 Sep. 1776.
[174] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 21.
[175] Tustin, ed., *Diary of the American War*, pp. 68 & 129.

is to consider whether or not he himself believed he had enough men to put his plans into effect.

Britain faced huge problems in raising a respectable army for service in America, but an army was raised and presented to Howe, who expressed his 'utter amazement'[176] at the efforts of Germain. These were not the most guarded words, and they may have come back to haunt him had his political opponents mounted a more concerted and credible attack on his period in command, but they clearly demonstrated that Howe believed he was being given an army suitable for the task at hand. Howe had initially declared that his most pressing concern was to destroy the rebel army under Washington and it is clear, from the lengthy delays in opening the 1776 campaign, that he believed he needed all of his reinforcements before he could begin operations.[177]

After the Battle of Long Island (perhaps encouraged by the ease with which his men had routed the Americans), Howe made very modest requests for reinforcements. Admitting that a second campaign would probably be necessary, he asked if a further 800 Hessian Jägers could be found (he referred to them as 'chasseurs', as the English commonly did), no doubt impressed with the quality of these elite German troops and envisioning a swarm of a thousand Jägers covering every movement of his army. He also asked for 100 dismounted Hussars from Hesse, to be provided with horses in America.[178]

Over the next three months, Howe's estimate of the reinforcements required for the 1777 campaign ballooned from less than a thousand to 15,000. Intervening events

[176] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 212-213, Howe to Germain, 8 Jun. 1776.
[177] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 30, Howe to Germain, 26 Apr. 1776.
[178] Ibid., ff. 255-256, Howe to Germain, 2 Sep. 1776.

(the landing at Kip's Bay, the Battle of Harlem Heights, the Battle of White Plains and the assault on Fort Washington) do not appear to offer any obvious reason for this. The reverse at Trenton could definitely be considered grounds for a more pessimistic view of the progress of the war, but that was still a month in the future when Howe asked for his 15,000 new men, at the end of November.[179] Considering all elements that would have factored into the equation, it is clear that Washington's army was no stronger than it had been at the start of the 1776 campaign (and was, in fact, a great deal weaker), while Howe's army had not suffered greatly in pushing the rebels out of New York. The only other variable was Howe's plan for the 1777 campaign, and it is clear that this must have changed, from a policy of destroying the rebel army, to one of occupying territory. Howe's communication with Germain reveals this quite clearly, charting a steady shift in his war aims, from a belief in July that destroying the rebel army was essential, to the assertion in August that he would need to force them out of New York before attempting to crush them and then, by November, the downgrading of a decisive battle to a secondary aim, something to be considered if the opportunity arose but not of overriding importance.[180]

Howe's initial plans for 1777 also showed a clear shift of emphasis. In the build up to the 1776 campaign, all talk had been of the need to establish New York as the focus of British operations, destroying the rebel army and linking up with the British army moving south from Canada.[181] Although only one of those three principal objectives had been accomplished (the establishing of a base at New York), Howe outlined a plan for 1777 in which New York was just one of three elements. An

[179] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[180] Ibid., ff. 214-216, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1776; Ibid., ff. 228-230, Howe to Germain, 6 Aug. 1776; Ibid, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[181] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 311-316, Howe to Dartmouth, 9 Oct. 1775; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776.

offensive corps of 10,000 was to operate from Rhode Island under Clinton, moving on Boston and possibly taking it. A further 8,000 men were to act defensively in New Jersey, protecting territories gained in 1776, while in the autumn Howe would move on Philadelphia and open operations in South Carolina and Georgia. Only 10,000 men were earmarked for an aggressive move up the Hudson to link up with the northern army. Adding in 2,000 and 5,000 men for garrison duties at Rhode Island and New York, respectively, Howe was talking about a substantial increase on his 1776 numbers. He believed he needed 15,000 reinforcements to put all the elements of his new, multi-faceted plan into operation, although Germain would dispute those figures.[182]

There was much to admire in Howe's new plan. It carried the war to the rebels in three separate areas (four, if the operations of the northern army were included) and would certainly have stretched their manpower, perhaps to breaking point. Following on from the remorseless advances made by Howe's army in 1776, this major expansion of the war might have appeared overwhelming and would certainly have struck a serious psychological blow to the Patriot cause, which was already badly shaken at the end of November 1776. There were two serious flaws with the plan, however. Firstly, there was no intention to target Washington's army, and Howe should have been aware that this was the physical embodiment of the rebel cause. Secondly, it was unlikely that reinforcements could be delivered in the quantities Howe believed he needed, at least not quickly enough to be useful in the coming campaign. Having expressed his amazement at what Germain had managed for 1776, and having shown that he was well aware of the drains on Britain from 'this

[182] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.

expensive war,'[183] Howe should have been aware that he was asking for too much. A strategy of reoccupation was not a viable one as Britain simply could not muster the troops necessary to garrison each of the posts as they were taken. Howe went even further with his next letter, claiming that 20,000 new troops were actually needed, although he could manage with 15,000.[184]

Howe's thinking at this point, and the validity or otherwise of his plans, while fascinating, are not relevant in the context of this chapter. The key point for now is that Germain replied that he would not be able to furnish the troops requested, and therefore, from 9 March 1777 (when Howe received Germain's response), Howe believed he did not have an army large enough to carry out his plans. This could not have been stated in clearer fashion than in Howe's letter to Germain of 2 April 1777:

> In the former campaign the force was suitable to the operation, whereas in the ensuing one, from the several posts necessary to be preserved, the offensive army will be too weak for rapid success…[185]

Howe's letter included the extremely pessimistic statement that, before the campaign had even opened, any hopes of it putting an end to the war were vanished, and it was in this frame of mind that Howe got to work on his second and final campaign as commander-in-chief. The result of this belief, that he was leading an army inadequate to his needs, was obvious, and the difference in Howe's approach to operations in 1777 is striking. Although criticised for his slowness in 1776, he nevertheless attacked the Americans on Long Island, manoeuvred them out of Manhattan, attacked them again at White Plains, stormed Fort Washington, captured Fort Lee and pursued Washington's army through New Jersey before closing the

[183] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776.
[184] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 11-12.
[185] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 64, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.

campaign. In 1777 he fought a major battle at the Brandywine and occupied Philadelphia. He did not even open the campaign proper (aside from some skirmishing with Washington's forces) before 22 July 1777. In his narrative, Howe spoke at length about how the failure to provide the requested troops had forced him to modify his plans, abandoning the aggressive move on Boston from Rhode Island, and how he had opened the campaign with 14,000 fewer men than he had expected. Von Muenchhausen agreed with the general theme that the British and Hessian force was insufficient for the job at hand, noting that the army was 'strong enough to chase the rebels, but… far from strong enough to penetrate deep into the country'.[186] Von Muenchhausen did not, however, agree with Howe's sums, reckoning he had close to 25,000 men under his command, which would only have been 10,000 short of his desired total.[187]

Adding to Howe's concerns (or, at least, to the list of reasons he put forward for wanting reinforcements) was his belief that the Americans had improved markedly over the course of the war. This was only to be expected – it was not only Howe's troops that were benefitting from a little campaign experience. In July (still not having opened operations for the year) Howe again wrote to Germain, noting that the war was on a different scale than it had been in the previous campaign because of the improvements in the American army. He noted the fact that their officer corps had been augmented with experienced French officers, that they had a strong train of field artillery following the arrival of 50 brass cannon at Boston (adding to the 40 cannon the Americans already possessed) and that, at the same time, British and Hessian numbers were being whittled away by casualties even without a general action. Howe

[186] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 5.
[187] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 9-12.

even made a request for 10,000 Russian troops, which comes across as faintly desperate given the failure to secure Russians prior to the 1776 campaign.[188]

Howe's term in command of the British army in America therefore fell into two distinct phases. For his first campaign he was confident that he had a suitable army with which to proceed. There were some discipline problems, but for the most part all his men needed was a little experience, which they steadily gained as the 1776 campaign progressed. Howe was able to undertake any operation he desired, was never in doubt about the superiority of his men over the rebels and had sufficient manpower to garrison New York, detach a force to occupy Rhode Island and then set up a string of posts in New Jersey to defend the territory gained that year.

For the following campaign, Howe modified his plans, committing to a policy of reoccupation, and felt he needed a substantial augmentation of his forces. When the requested reinforcements did not materialise, he felt that his force was now inadequate for his plans and curtailed them dramatically. In 1776 Howe had embarked on a campaign that he believed, at least initially, might end the rebellion. In 1777, he had no such ambitions.

[188] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 70-72, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1777.

III

Howe's relationship with Lord George Germain

William Howe's most important working relationship was with the American Secretary, Lord George Germain. Howe and Germain were effectively a partnership; together they would plan the direction of the war and Howe would use the army that Germain assembled to put those plans into action. Any experience of working on a major collaborative effort will demonstrate how important it is that goals are shared and the methods of proceeding agreed upon, even if there is creative tension in the process. Neither was the case here.

The standard interpretation of Howe's dealings with Germain is of a steady deterioration in their relationship, with Germain gradually losing faith in his commander-in-chief after a harmonious start. In *The American Secretary*, Brown claimed that they each had the complete confidence of the other as Howe left Halifax on 10 June 1776 to begin his offensive operations against New York, and that Germain's confidence only began to deteriorate in the summer of 1777.[1] Gruber contested that problems started earlier; from March 1777, Germain had been concerned enough about Howe's performance to encourage him repeatedly to inject more urgency into proceedings.[2] One of the most recent historians to address the issue, Andrew O'Shaughnessy, also believed that the relationship had started to experience difficulties in early 1777.[3]

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[1] G. S. Brown, *The American Secretary: The Colonial Policy of Lord George Germain, 1775-1778* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 77 & p. 116.
[2] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 185.
[3] A. O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Command During the Revolutionary War and the Preservation of Empire* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2013), pp. 105-106.

The relationship between Howe and German was complicated by many factors. Howe, although not officially a member of the opposition, was a Whig politician, while Germain was a Tory. Howe held considerably more moderate views on the war. Although it would be going too far to label him a 'dove', he was far more conciliatory than Germain.[4] Add to these differences of personality the tricky nature of Germain's ambitions in trying to resurrect his reputation following his disgrace at Minden in the Seven Years War, and this was a relationship with strong undercurrents.[5] Germain has been criticised widely for his running of the war, with ultimate blame for the disaster at Saratoga being shared fairly evenly between Germain, Howe and Burgoyne (Howe for abandoning the Hudson strategy and therefore Burgoyne, Germain for not ordering Howe to stick to the agreed strategy and Burgoyne for allowing himself to be defeated). Bitter factionalism was a contributing factor to the demonisation of Germain by the Whigs as the man responsible for military failure in America, but Germain is open to criticism for not getting Howe to follow the coercive strategy that he (Germain) favoured.[6]

Exactly how much criticism can fairly be aimed at Germain is debateable. The nature of eighteenth-century communications (a letter from America could take anything from four to six weeks to reach Great Britain, while its reply would generally take between six and nine weeks to make the return crossing)[7] inevitably left Howe to his own devices for much of the time during his period as commander-

[4] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, pp. 58-59.
[5] Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 48
[6] Ibid., p. 47. Mackesy quoted F. V. Greene as calling Germain, 'probably the most incompetent official that ever held an important post at a critical moment'; Black, *War for America*, p.125. Black wrote of the 'fatal failure' to coordinate operations in the two theatres of the war; W. B. Willcox, 'Too Many Cooks: British Planning Before Saratoga', *The Journal of British Studies*, 2 (1) (Nov., 1962), p. 56. Willcox also commented on the lack of a unifying concept in the 1777 campaign.
[7] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 320-332. Various letters between Howe and Germain

in-chief, and it would have been unreasonable to insist that he stick rigidly to written orders (which may have been conceived months earlier) regardless of changing circumstances. Howe had to have discretion to act as he saw fit depending on, among other factors, enemy movements and troop concentrations. Still, Germain gave Howe more than discretionary powers, allowing him to formulate his own plans and giving his blessing to almost every one that was submitted for approval. There was still pressure on Howe to please his political master, but it would take time for the direction the war was taking to become apparent back home in Britain and this would act as a buffer for Howe, delaying Germain's reaction.

Germain did not officially choose Howe as commander-in-chief (that decision had been taken before he took over from Lord Dartmouth in November 1775), but he wholeheartedly approved of him and there is evidence that he had significant input in getting Howe onto the *Cerberus* as the de facto successor to Gage.[8] As has already been seen, it was Howe's experiences in North America, and his particular expertise in light infantry tactics, that convinced Germain that he was the man for the job.[9] Howe certainly had experience that made him a candidate for the position, but Germain might have considered the man himself more closely, especially when gauging how willing he would be to wage the sort of war Germain was planning. The choice of Howe had much to do with his ability to appeal to both sides of the debate on how to approach the conflict. His previous ties to America and his conciliatory nature appealed to the moderates, including Lords North and Dartmouth, while his experience of irregular warfare and the fact that he would be a recognised name with which to command the respect of the rebels appealed to the more hawkish Germain.

[8] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, pp. 58-59.
[9] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 2-3, Lord George Germain to Lord Suffolk, 16 Jun. 1775.

Howe was effectively a compromise candidate, each faction seeing in him the qualities they desired. Germain would prove to be the most susceptible to this selective vision.[10]

Although Germain's disenchantment with Howe was indeed a gradual process, it started much earlier than either Brown or Gruber suggested, beginning to take shape as early as the summer of 1776, before the offensive campaign had even started. Moreover, although this was an important development in the progress of the war, it was not the crucial one. In March 1777, a corresponding and far more destructive loss of confidence appeared on the other side of the relationship. In contrast to the slow ebbing of Germain's belief in his general, Howe's doubt centred on a single letter from Germain, written on 14 January and received by Howe on 9 March.[11] That doubt did not focus on Germain's abilities, but rather on Howe's perception of how Germain viewed *him*. After receiving Germain's letter, Howe began to suspect that the American Secretary had lost confidence in him.[12] It was a premature doubt; Germain was losing patience with Howe when he responded to his request for extravagant reinforcements, but he still believed that he could complete the task of subduing the rebellion. Howe reacted as if all ministerial support and confidence had been ripped from beneath him in one violent act.[13] Germain's loss of confidence in Howe was therefore the key issue for both men, although each perceived it at different times, and this brought a premature end to their ability to work effectively together.

Their relationship was complex. Germain was Howe's political master and theoretically had the power to remove him from command of the army if he saw fit,

[10] O'Shaughnessy, *Men Who Lost America*, pp. 83-84.
[11] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 1-6, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777. Date of receipt by Howe is noted in *Parliamentary Register; or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons*, Vol. X (London: Wilson and Co. 1802), p. 381.
[12] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 14.
[13] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.

but Howe had political friends (he was himself a Member of Parliament) and was in favour with the King. Moreover, in a war that divided opinion in Britain, Howe was a popular figure with the public, offering another layer to his armour.[14] There was a real risk that removing him from his post (without evidence of incompetence on a grand scale) would have devastating repercussions on the administration of Lord North, which was under pressure from a small but effective opposition including Charles Fox and Edmund Burke.[15] The idea of Germain looking for a way to oust the commander-in-chief would have seemed an unlikely scenario when Howe took over command in Boston and Germain stepped into the office of the American Secretary, but just over two years later he was receiving Howe's appeal to resign his position without a word of protest. The fact that Howe (assuming he did not commit a monumental blunder) was essentially untouchable is an intriguing facet of his relationship with Germain, but this only served to prolong matters when problems arose in the running of the war. The problems themselves arose because the two men were waging different wars.[16]

From the start, it was clear Germain meant to tackle the problem aggressively. Gage, recalled to England to report on events in the colonies (thus getting him out of the way so that Howe could take over), wrote to Clinton in early 1776 to declare that Germain was 'indefatigable in his endeavours,'[17] a sentiment that was shared by others in Clinton's list of correspondents. Gruber, who put together a meticulous

[14] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, p. 43. Anderson claimed that 'practically all of his [Howe's] contemporaries bore witness to the general esteem in which he was held'.
[15] W. Cobbet, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, Vol. XVIII (29 Nov. 1774 to 13 Dec. 1776), (London: T. C. Hansard, 1813), p. 991 and p. 999. Fox was described as being 'very severe upon administration' on 16 Nov. 1777, while Burke characterized the ministry's attitude to the colonies as 'silly and wicked' on 20 Nov.
[16] I. D. Gruber, 'The Origins of British Strategy in the War for American Independence' in *Military History of the American Revolution*, ed. S. J. Underdal (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1976), pp. 43-44.
[17] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XIII, f. 29, Thomas Gage to Henry Clinton, 1 Feb. 1776.

reconstruction of Germain's fading confidence in Howe, dubbed him 'the personification of belligerency,'[18] but as events played out it slowly became apparent that Howe had very different ideas.[19]

At first glance it appears that Howe and Germain worked well together at the opening of the war, and it could even be argued that they came very close to defeating the rebel army and possibly ending the rebellion. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the two were never working towards the same goal. It would take the entire 1776 campaign (so successful on the surface) to strip away delusions. The 1777 campaign was then essentially thrown away as both men had come to realise they could not work with each other. From April 1776, when Howe first became aware that Germain had taken over the running of the war from Lord Dartmouth, to March 1777, when he realised he would not be getting the reinforcements he had requested and responded in peevish tones, Howe-Germain was an effective working partnership for less than a year. The relationship would effectively end in the divorce court of the House of Commons, where each attempted to shift blame onto the other.[20]

The formulation of British strategy for 1776

The basic parameters of the strategy Britain was to pursue in 1776 had been laid down before Germain replaced Dartmouth as the American Secretary. New York and the Hudson River had been selected as the focus of operations, having been suggested by

[18] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 37.
[19] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 2, Lord George Germain to Lord Suffolk, 16 Jun. 1775; WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XIII, f. 31, Richard Cox to Clinton, 2 Feb. 1776; Ibid., f. 32, Charles Mellish to Clinton, 2 Feb. 1776; Ibid., f. 37, Francis Hastings to Clinton, 7 Feb. 1776.
[20] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.

Howe in June 1775 and by Dartmouth in both April and August.[21] Initially, the intention was to retain some troops in Boston to act in a diversionary capacity, but events conspired to make that an impossibility (the American positions on the Dorchester Heights, occupied in March 1776, rendered Boston untenable for the British). Howe appeared to be an enthusiastic proponent of the Hudson strategy, suggesting it as the basis for an aggressive campaign in a letter to his brother that found its way into Germain's hands as he was formulating his own plans in anticipation of taking over from Dartmouth.[22]

The letter can be viewed as an indirect appeal to be handed the reins for the upcoming campaign. Aware that Germain was likely to take over from Dartmouth as the American Secretary, Howe filled the letter to his brother with everything Germain would want to hear as policy for the upcoming war was discussed and finalised. Important elements included a modest army (Howe asked for just 19,000 men at this early stage) and a clear idea of how the men would be used (12,000 to act offensively on the Hudson, 3,500 to move up the Connecticut river at the same time, with 3,500 remaining as a garrison in Boston). Even more alluring was an assertion that Howe believed a force of this magnitude could end the war in a single campaign. Howe went on to describe how enough men could be found from augmentation of existing regiments and volunteers from the militia. The Guards could provide three battalions, while seven regiments could come from Ireland. Under Howe's plan, there would be no need to go to the expense of raising or hiring new regiments.[23]

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[21] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 100-113, Dartmouth to Gage, 15 Apr. 1775; Ibid., ff. 200-206, Dartmouth to Gage, 2 Aug. 1775.
[22] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, pp. 60-61. Gruber explained how this letter was intended for Germain's attention.
[23] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775.

On 9 October 1775, Howe also wrote to Dartmouth (prior to Germain taking over) in some detail on a revised plan, in which the essential element was now a linking-up with a second British army moving south, down the Hudson, from Canada. Howe demonstrated that he understood this perfectly, explaining how his first priority would be to link up with that army and establish a series of posts along the river. This same letter, however, revealed the first hint of what was to become an enduring problem during the two campaigns in which Howe and Germain worked together. In establishing his posts on the Hudson, to isolate rebellious New England from the middle and southern colonies, the destruction of Washington's Continental Army was to be critical, yet Howe wrote only that 'the reduction of the rebels in the province of New York must in some measure be included'.[24]

Germain's ideas were far more decisive and aggressive. He wanted a commander who would have the ability to think on his feet, adapt to circumstances and not need constant instruction from home. In fact, the vast distances between the politicians at home and the men in the field rendered such a commander indispensible. Germain also wanted to wage a punitive war, explaining his opinion that a naval blockade and raids would distress the colonists and force them to accept British mastery once more, and he knew from an early stage that the hiring of foreign troops (sure to be viewed with indignation by the colonists) would be necessary if Howe was to defeat the rebel army.[25]

However Howe's army was composed, it is clear what Germain intended it to be used for. He wanted an aggressive war, and Howe was in no doubt about this, acknowledging that his political master wanted the war to be prosecuted 'with the

[24] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 311-316, Howe to Dartmouth, 9 Oct. 1775.
[25] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 2, Germain to Suffolk, 16 Jun. 1775.

utmost vigour'.[26] Germain wanted the rebellion to be put down in one campaign (and Howe's letter of 12 June must have persuaded him that Howe believed this was possible). There were various motivating factors at work in Germain's thinking, among them, possibly, his own military disgrace at the Battle of Minden in 1759. Having failed to obey an order to bring the British cavalry into action, Germain (still Lord Sackville at the time) had been court-martialled and, infamously, condemned as unfit to serve His Majesty in any military capacity whatsoever.[27] Germain's disgrace was an easy target for his enemies and there were snide comments about him hoping to reconquer Germany in America.[28] A wish to restore his reputation may have been a partial explanation for his hawkishness and energy for the job, but there were sound reasons for wanting a swift resolution to the conflict. The longer it went on, the harder it might become to convince the colonists to return to their previous state. The rebel army would gain experience and potentially become a more formidable opponent. Foreign powers might be tempted to lend assistance to the rebels and perhaps even send troops if they thought a British defeat was possible. Finally, the expense of mounting a military campaign at a distance of 3,000 miles, including the hiring of foreign troops, was sure to be enormous and could not be sustained year after year.[29]

Despite Germain's desire to crush the rebel army and end the rebellion in 1776, he does not seem to have explicitly conveyed this wish to Howe. Germain wrote of his hopes for a decisive battle in May 1776, while in June he hoped that military successes in Canada had opened a prospect of ending the rebellion in a single

[26] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XV, f. 10, Howe to Clinton, 12 Apr. 1776.
[27] Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 49.
[28] E. Gibbon, *The Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon Esq.*, (B. Blake: London, 1837), p. 278, Gibbon to J. B. Holroyd, Nov. 1776.
[29] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776. In this letter, his first to Germain, Howe acknowledged the expensive nature of the war; Ibid., ff. 189-190, Germain to Howe, 21 Jun. 1776. Germain revealed how the expense of the war was weighing on his mind even at this early stage.

campaign.[30] Not once, however, did he convey his wishes as clearly to Howe as he did to other correspondents, including General Irwin, to whom he wrote that 'I should be for exerting the utmost force of this kingdom to finish this rebellion in one campaign'.[31] This was certainly a curious omission, but it set the tone for Germain's style of leadership, in which he repeatedly failed to make his wishes explicit. It is possible to argue that Germain made his wishes clear without needing to resort to crude bluntness, but when matters came to a head in the House of Commons during the Howe Inquiry, the commander-in-chief was able to use that lack of bluntness against the American Secretary and accuse him of not issuing clear orders.[32]

It is also reasonable to argue that, from Germain's perspective, Howe apparently held exactly the same opinion on how the war should be fought. His letter to his brother in June 1775 was just the first of a substantial number in which he declared that his aim in the campaign would be to follow the Hudson strategy and destroy the main rebel army. It took time for Germain to realise that Howe was not conforming to the agreed strategy. Later in the war Germain deserved censure for failing to bring Howe back to the agreed plan, but in 1776 he had every reason to believe that he and the general agreed on how the war should be prosecuted.

Having agreed on a strategy to follow, the two men took up their respective roles. It was Germain's job to ensure Howe had an army suitable for the strategy agreed upon. It was Howe's job to put that army to best use. Germain made it clear how he would proceed in his first speech to the House of Commons after taking over

[30] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 116-120, Germain to Howe, 3 May. 1776; Ibid., ff. 183-188, Germain to Howe, 11 Jun. 1776.
[31] Lomas, S. C., ed., *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville, Vol. I* (London: Mackie & Co. Ltd, 1904), Germain to General Irwin, 13 Sep. 1775, pp. 136-137.
[32] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 9.

as the American Secretary, on 16 November 1775.[33] The key point of a short speech was that he considered the officers in America to be best placed to determine how big the army needed to be to successfully restore order in the colonies. His job would merely be to ensure they got the men they requested and he effectively issued a guarantee that this would be the case (Germain had the security of already knowing how big an army his commander-in-chief would request, of course). Germain was also clearly delineating responsibilities. Whether he was hedging his bets against possible failure is impossible to tell (although, given his confidence at this time, it seems unlikely), but his speech could be viewed as putting on record his responsibilities. His job, as he saw it, was to give his generals the men they requested; unspoken, but implied, was the idea that what they did with those forces was their responsibility. Germain's speech, although it laid out methodically and calmly the principles on which the war would be fought, was also peppered with words such as 'suppress' and 'crush'.[34] His feelings were clear.

The size of the British army in America was to become a key debating point in the Howe Inquiry of 1779, in which Howe claimed he had not been given enough troops by Germain for the 1777 campaign.[35] The pure numbers were obviously important, but of equal weight was the confidence Howe took from having his requests for troops met or even exceeded. This was demonstrated clearly in the differing attitudes expressed by Howe at the beginning of the 1776 campaign and during the planning for 1777. In the first campaign he felt he had been given more troops than he had asked for and was effusive in his praise. In early 1777 he was told he would not receive anywhere near the number of reinforcements he had requested

[33] Cobbet, ed., *Parliamentary History*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 989-991.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 12.

and he became pessimistic, even truculent, and withdrew into a disastrously inactive campaign.[36]

The conveniently round figure of 20,000 troops had long been accepted as the requisite amount for an aggressive 1776 campaign. Dartmouth had suggested this number to Gage in August 1775, before they had both been replaced as the leading figures in the war, and Burgoyne had also come to the same number when writing to the King around the same time.[37] Howe accepted it as a realistic figure. Via Lord Howe, in September, Germain learned of the general's belief that an army of 20,000 men would be sufficient, 15,000 to act from New York and 5,000 to garrison Boston (in the same letter Germain also learned that Howe believed that if an army of this size could not be assembled, the British would be better off withdrawing completely and allowing the colonies to descend into civil war).[38] Howe elaborated on his thoughts in a letter to Dartmouth a month later, explaining that he would use 12,000 men in New York (five battalions garrisoning the city and the remainder moving up the Hudson), with 5,000 remaining at Boston to tie down rebel forces there.[39] The remaining 3,000 men would form the backbone of the northern army (the one to proceed down the Hudson from Canada), to be supplemented by 3-4,000 Canadians and Indians. Howe was therefore suggesting that he could put his side of the Hudson strategy into effect with just 17,000 men. However, although expressing satisfaction with the figure of 20,000 men, he did go on to say that an extra 5,000 would be useful, to be equally split between Rhode Island and Canada.[40]

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[36] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.
[37] Ibid., CO 5/92, ff. 200-206, Dartmouth to Gage, 2 Aug. 1775; Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of King George III*, pp. 243-245, Burgoyne to George III, 18 Aug. 1775.
[38] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 9, Lord Richard Howe to Germain, 25 Sep. 1775.
[39] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 311-316, Howe to Dartmouth, 9 Oct. 1775
[40] Ibid.

Getting enough men to act aggressively was one thing. When they would arrive in America was an entirely different matter. In his October letter to Dartmouth, Howe expressed his desire to receive his reinforcements in the following spring, believing this to be essential if he was to strike a decisive blow against the rebels. He hoped that troops would begin their transatlantic crossing by the beginning of February so that he might be ready to open operations by the middle of April. Germain's reply, sent in November, would have been disappointing; he reported that recruitment was going slowly. Following the news that Catherine the Great of Russia had refused to provide troops, attention was shifting towards the German states. Germain did say that he still hoped to provide the army of 20,000, but it looked like being a frustratingly slow process and the Russian debacle had cost time.[41] Howe's hope to open operations in the spring may have been optimistic, but he was not alone in seeing the benefits that might come from an early start. Lord North had expressed to the King that getting 2,000 men to Howe early in the spring would be as good as sending him 6,000 later in the year, while Burgoyne had pointed out that delay would enable the Americans to fortify New York.[42] As events unfolded, it quickly became clear that the spring deadline would be missed.

The 1776 campaign

Although Britain enjoyed considerable success in the 1776 campaign, this masked a steady unravelling of the Hudson strategy as Howe pursued a policy of territorial occupation rather than seeking a decisive battle. Strain would be placed on the Howe-Germain relationship as the year progressed and evidence slowly mounted that Howe

[41] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 317-318, Germain to Howe, 18 Nov. 1775.
[42] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of King George III*, p. 288, Lord North to George III, 10 Nov. 1775; Ibid., pp. 243-245, Burgoyne to George III, 18 Aug. 1775.

was not using the army in the way Germain had intended. As was the case with Howe's relationship with Clinton, things seem to have started off well. Correspondence was one-sided at first, as it took time for news of Germain's appointment to reach America. Thus, while Germain was keeping Howe informed on his efforts to provide him with a suitable army, Howe believed he was still writing to Dartmouth, whom Germain replaced in November 1775.[43] A letter from Howe, sent on 25 April 1776, acknowledged Germain's letter to him of 5 January, and can be viewed as the date when their working relationship effectively started. Although the inevitable delays in communication had been exacerbated by Howe's hurried evacuation from Boston and relocation to Halifax, this letter was a fitting way for the relationship to start. Howe's first letter to Germain opened with optimism, including the well-known proclamation that a decisive action at New York would be the best way 'to terminate this expensive war'.[44] This, along with Howe's stated desire to check the rebels' enthusiasm following their success at driving the British out of Boston, must have encouraged Germain, but Howe's letter quickly took on a less positive tone. Citing their ability to construct strong entrenchments, Howe predicted that unless he was able to get possession of New York early in the campaign, before his reinforcements arrived, the rebels might choose to act on the defensive and spin out the campaign by avoiding a decisive battle.[45] In his first letter to Germain, then, Howe was already raising the spectre of an inconclusive campaign.

A private letter to Germain, written the day after and sent at the same time, included flattery ('the whole army rejoices in the idea of acting under your Lordship's

[43] Mackesy, *War for America*, pp. 46-47.
[44] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776.
[45] Ibid.

auspices'[46]) but also more pessimism. Despite professing a desire to gain a decisive victory to encourage the loyalist element in the colonies, Howe again raised doubts about being able to draw the rebels into a major engagement. He went so far as to predict that he would find it hard to pursue the rebels if they withdrew from a battle due to the difficulties he *expected* to encounter in finding enough wagons for transportation. Germain may also have been struck by Howe's declaration that he was ready to carry Germain's plans into operation, which again would have suggested that this might not be the vigorous, resourceful man he was banking on. It also hinted at Howe laying the first foundation of his defence (that he was following Germain's orders) should the campaign go badly.

Howe's first communications with Germain therefore would have given the new American Secretary much to ponder. There was a disturbing undercurrent of pessimism in Howe's letters, but just enough apparent desire for a decisive battle to counterbalance it. Germain's earlier letters to Howe had been full of encouragement, approving of Howe's plans for the 1776 campaign (submitted to Dartmouth the preceding October).[47] Germain also made it clear to Howe that he fully accepted his reasons for not evacuating Boston when ordered to do so by Dartmouth, and that he would be provided with an army greater than he had requested. A total of 17,000 reinforcements would be sent to him, including an estimated 10,000 foreign troops (at the time of writing, 5 January 1776, it had not yet been finalised where the troops would come from).[48] Less positively, an early start to the campaign was already looking doubtful; Germain made it clear that the first reinforcements (the newly raised 71st Regiment and 1,000 men of the 42nd Regiment) would not be ready to sail

[46] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 30, Howe to Germain, 26 Apr. 1776.
[47] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 317-318, Germain to Howe, 18 Nov. 1775.
[48] Ibid., CO 5/93, ff. 1-10, Germain to Howe, 5 Jan. 1776.

until at least early April and recruitment for other units was going slowly.[49] Almost a month later, Germain had better news. The Guards had showed themselves so eager to serve His Majesty that a thousand of them were to be given the chance to do so in America. As well as boosting Howe's reinforcements, the composite battalion, drawn from the three elite Guards regiments, would be more valuable than a collection of new recruits.[50]

Germain's energy and enthusiasm for the job at hand is evident in his letters, but at the same time it is impossible not to register the steady ticking of the campaign clock. It would be another two months before Germain could confirm that an agreement was in place for the hiring of 12,200 German troops.[51] As Germain wrote to Howe, at the end of March, transports were on their way to pick up these troops. They would have to be brought to England and then shipped on to North America, which, given the time necessary for crossing the Atlantic, would obviously take months (the first Hessian troops actually arrived in America on 12 August).[52] The Guards were on their way to Portsmouth, but would wait there to sail with the Hessians, while the 71st and 42nd Regiments were now not expected to sail from the Clyde until 20 April. Another month would pass before Germain could report that the 3,466 men from the two Scottish regiments were embarked at Spithead and (hopefully) ready to sail.[53]

Delays were only to be expected in eighteenth-century military planning and, considering the scale of the operation, some of the slippage was undoubtedly inevitable. Less understandable was the delay caused by Clinton's ill-fated southern

[49] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 1-10, Germain to Howe, 5 Jan. 1776.
[50] Ibid., ff. 17-20, Germain to Howe, 1 Feb. 1776.
[51] Ibid., ff. 69-76, Germain to Howe, 28 Mar. 1776.
[52] Ibid., ff. 247-248, Howe to Germain, 15 Aug. 1776.
[53] Ibid., ff. 81-82, Germain to Howe, 27 Apr. 1776.

expedition, which had originally been intended to be something of a lightning strike early in the year. It had been hoped that the expedition might set sail before Christmas, giving plenty of time for the regiments involved to join Howe for his main offensive.[54] By the end of March it was clear that the narrow window of opportunity for such an expedition had closed; there was no way now for troops to sail from England, undertake the operation under Clinton and return to Howe in time for an early start to the main offensive. Germain, to his credit, recognised this fact and informed Howe that he was ordering Clinton to call off the expedition and take the troops (when they finally arrived) straight to New York in order that operations there might open in May or the beginning of June.[55] Exactly how Germain issued this order, however, is unclear. Clinton's papers include no such written order from Germain and he makes no mention of it in his account of his service in America. Letters could fail to reach their destination for any number of reasons and it is quite possible that Germain's order simply never arrived with Clinton. Even had he received no written order from Germain, however, Clinton was informed by Howe that he had been redirected to New York. The problem was that this letter from Howe was not even sent until 22 May and, as events turned out, Clinton did not head back to New York until the middle of July.[56]

The delays in getting troops to Howe, both avoidable and unavoidable, led to the first strains in the Howe-Germain relationship as the weeks and months passed with no opening of the campaign. It appears that Germain had on at least one occasion attempted to venture beyond a merely professional relationship, recounting an amusing anecdote concerning a General Howard, apparently a friend of Howe's. The

[54] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of King George III*, pp. 265-268, Lord North to George III, 15 Oct. 1775.
[55] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 69-76, Germain to Howe, 28 Mar. 1776.
[56] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVI, f.1, Howe to Clinton, 22 May 1776.

letter (presumably a private one, which does not appear to have survived) prompted a rather stiff reply from Howe, who thanked Germain but swiftly moved on to business matters without any attempt to reciprocate the spirit of the original letter.[57] There does not appear to have been any further attempt by Germain to engage in such banter. His subsequent letters continued to keep Howe appraised of developments in the raising of his army, but also betrayed the first signs that Germain believed his general needed to be encouraged. Choosing to brush aside the pessimism contained in Howe's correspondence, Germain instead praised him for his 'spirit and vigour'[58] in aiming for an early strike against the Americans. Curiously, though no doubt aware at the time of writing (3 May) that it was taking far longer than hoped to amass the forces required for the campaign, Germain then advised Howe to wait until reinforcements had arrived before moving.

This seems an unusual request from a man apparently bursting with enthusiasm to take the war to the rebels, and it certainly gave Howe ample justification in delaying the start of his campaign until those reinforcements had arrived, but it is possible to see a method in Germain's words; in fact he went on to offer an explanation himself. His desire for Howe to wait was because it would 'render your [Howe's] success more certain'.[59] Germain was set on a major battle to destroy the rebel army and naturally saw the amassing of force as more likely to lead to that outcome. It is possible that Germain was nervous about Howe opening the campaign with a reduced force (given his stated preference for an early start) and not being able to secure a decisive victory. In a sense, there was a danger that Howe might simply put his quarry to flight rather than destroying it completely and if this was Germain's

[57] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 31, Howe to Germain, 12 May. 1776.
[58] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 116-120, Germain to Howe, 3 May 1776.
[59] Ibid.

fear, then it would have been stoked by a letter from Howe on 7 June, in which the general declared that if he did not feel his army was large enough prior to the arrival of the reinforcements, he was tempted to act anyway, simply to force the Americans to vacate New York. This was most certainly not what Germain had in mind and shows that Howe was already entertaining doubts over the task of destroying the rebel army.[60]

During the summer of 1776, Howe's correspondence became increasingly non-committal about the prospect of drawing the rebels into a major engagement. On 12 May he was referring to 'this complicated war'[61] and hinting that the success of the campaign would rest on the quality of the foreign troops and the willingness of the Canadians. In June he believed a decisive battle would only be possible if the rebels were willing to meet him in the open field and by August he was talking of merely dislodging the rebels from New York.[62] Reasons for his delay in moving included the obvious (and authorised) wait for reinforcements, but also concerns about the strength of American positions on Long Island and the need for camp equipment, including kettles. By 10 August he was expressing his mortification at still only being on Staten Island, adding that the advanced season now meant that he was looking only to occupy New York and Rhode Island by the end of the year and that another campaign would be necessary.[63]

It is not possible to know for certain how Germain would have reacted to each of these steps towards an abandonment of the aggressive, active campaign he had

[60] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 33-36, Howe to Germain, 7 Jun. 1776.
[61] Ibid., p. 31, Howe to Germain, 12 May. 1776.
[62] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 33-36, Howe to Germain, 7 Jun. 1776; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 228-230, Howe to Germain, 6 Aug. 1776.
[63] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 37, Howe to Germain, 10 Aug. 1776.

planned for, but it is possible to chart an increasing sense of urgency, even desperation, in his communications with Howe. In June, he hoped that positive news from Quebec meant that putting an end to the rebellion in one campaign was still possible.[64] Later that month he seemed to have convinced himself that the general might actually have already gained possession of New York (or at least might have by the time he received the letter) following the expected safe arrival of the Highland regiments.[65] By August he was attempting to fudge the issue on the reinforcements, implying that it had only been the intention that Howe should wait for one of the multiple corps on their way to him, rather than all of them.[66] Another letter on the same day made what could be interpreted as a pointed reference to Howe's 'tedious detention at Halifax'[67] and to his being 'so long prevented from executing these plans which your zeal and wisdom had projected'. (Responsibility for the strategy being followed was still being batted back and forth.) By the end of September there was a distinct air of resignation (and perhaps even a note of sarcasm) when he declared himself 'too well convinced of your zeal and alertness to suppose that there will be any unnecessary delay in your operations'.[68]

It is easy to see in Germain a capacity for self-delusion, an unwillingness to face facts that seem obvious to an impartial observer, but it must be remembered that the delays in communications (it could be anything from 10 weeks before a reply to a letter could be expected from America, and it was frequently much longer) often left him entirely uninformed on events overseas. It is poignant to note that when he was writing to Howe (on 21 June) in the hope that he had captured New York, the British

[64] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 183-188, Germain to Howe, 11 Jun. 1776.
[65] Ibid., ff. 189-190, Germain to Howe, 21 Jun. 1776.
[66] Ibid., ff. 223-225, Germain to Howe, 22 Aug. 1776.
[67] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X *(London: Wilson and Co. 1802)*, p. 352, Germain to Howe, 22 Aug. 1776.
[68] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 251-252, Germain to Howe, 30 Sep. 1776.

army was still sailing there. The same letter betrayed one of Germain's primary concerns – the huge expense of the war. Allowing his dream of Howe's capture of New York to play out, he wrote of his hope that Howe would now be able to source much of his supplies from Long Island and require less to be shipped out, at great expense, from Britain. He even went so far as to say that it would be helpful if many of the transports used to take Howe's reinforcements to America could be dismissed from the service, due to their expense, and that Howe should take care not to keep more in service than was absolutely necessary.[69]

The expense of the war effort was a key factor in Germain's planning. At the heart of his increasing anxiety at Howe's apparent reluctance to move was the knowledge that he had pushed the system to its limits to put an army together. He had banked on an aggressive, hard-hitting campaign and simply replacing losses for a further effort in 1777 would be difficult. Any hopes of finding substantial numbers of reinforcements to increase Howe's army the next year were slim indeed (as would be demonstrated when Howe made just such a request at the end of the year).[70] Germain had over-delivered for 1776. Asked for an army of 20,000, he had assembled one closer to 30,000. This had been greeted with 'utter amazement'[71] by Howe, but he had not shown any inclination to expand his ambitions to match his expanded army. In fact, Howe's horizons had steadily contracted and as the campaigning months passed by it was becoming increasingly doubtful that he would have time to achieve the twin goals of decisively defeating Washington's army and moving in force up the Hudson to link up with the northern army. He had started to edge away from any commitment to the first goal and had simply stopped mentioning the second altogether.

[69] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 189-190, Germain to Howe, 21 Jun. 1776.
[70] Ibid., CO 5/94, f. 3, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777. Germain admitted that Howe's request for 15,000 reinforcements had 'really alarmed' him.
[71] Ibid., CO 5/93, ff. 212-213, Howe to Germain, 8 Jun. 1776.

When Germain finally received news that Howe had opened operations with great effect at Long Island, his joy was almost unbounded.[72] Writing in extravagant terms of the honour Howe had earned, he praised him for combining the 'fire of youth' with the 'wisdom and conduct of the most experienced commander'.[73] In a separate letter on the same day, he even went so far as to claim that Long Island was the first example of a perfect battle in terms of both planning and execution. The praise seems excessive, but the great relief felt by Germain on hearing of the victory is unmistakeable and understandable, especially when it is taken into account that he did not receive Howe's report until 28 September. The good news brought Germain's hawkish streak to the fore, as he relished the possibility of the rebel army disintegrating entirely, leaving Howe free to march on Philadelphia and punish the seat of Congress. Another subtle layer was added to Germain's hints that a quick outcome to the war was required. Referring to a French naval build-up, Germain stated that a decisive victory in America would be the best form of defence against France.[74]

Germain's joy was to be dampened quickly. Less than two weeks after receiving the report of the Battle of Long Island, a further letter arrived from Howe, which limited itself to a request for an extra 800 Hessian chasseurs and 100 unmounted hussars. It was not an extravagant request, but Germain would have noted why Howe was making it with some concern. The general believed another campaign

[72] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776. Containing Howe's report on the Battle of Long Island, received by Germain on 28 September according to *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 340.
[73] P. Force, *Peter Force's American Archives*, Fifth Series, Vol. II (Washington DC: M. St. Clair Clarke and Peter Force, 1848), p. 1111, Germain to Howe, 18 Oct. 1776.
[74] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 42-43, Germain to Howe, 18 Oct. 1776.

was probable.[75] In November, another batch of correspondence arrived from America and, again, there was a positive start. Taken in chronological order, the first three letters reported how the British had gained possession of the city of New York, on Manhattan (setting fire to New York appeared to be the only semblance of resistance offered by the rebels), as well as occupying Paulus Hook. This appeared to be a rebellion that was crumbling at the first sign of stern disapproval from the mother country.[76]

As was so often the case with Howe's correspondence, however, the tone changed abruptly. As Germain read through the batch of letters, all of which arrived on 2 November, he would have reached one written on 25 September.[77] Following a string of nearly unopposed successes, Howe was suddenly stricken with doubt again. He saw further progress during the 1776 campaign as highly doubtful and proposed only to occupy Rhode Island. He noted that the campaigning season was coming to a close and that the second division of Hessians (around 4,000 strong) had not yet arrived. He was not confident that Carleton would be making progress from the north to divert the attention of the rebel army under Washington, and loyalists had not proved willing to serve in the numbers he had been led to expect. The rebels were posted too strongly (around the Harlem Heights and Fort Washington, on Manhattan) to be attacked frontally and there were too many difficulties to mention to get around their flanks. Perhaps most worrying of all, Howe declared that he did not want to risk

[75] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 255-256, Howe to Germain, 2 Sep. 1776. Although written a day earlier than the report on Long Island, this letter (containing Howe's request for modest reinforcements) reached Germain nearly two weeks later, on 10 October, according to *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 340.
[76] Ibid., ff. 274-276, Howe to Germain, 21 Sep. 1776; Ibid., Howe to Germain, 23 Sep. 1776, ff. 279-280. Containing details on the fire in New York on the night of 20-21 September; *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 347, Howe to Germain, 24 Sep. 1776.
[77] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 283-284, Howe to Germain, 25 Sep. 1776.

a further action, as any setback would be disastrous for the war effort. In short, he wrote, there was no chance whatsoever of ending the rebellion without another campaign.[78]

Given Germain's customary optimism, it is reasonable to suggest that the string of letters from Howe, detailing the flight of the rebels from Long Island, New York City and Paulus Hook, had raised hopes and even expectations of ending the military side of the rebellion that year. Howe had taken his time to move, but he had moved with great effect when the campaign had finally opened. With the events of the campaign truncated into a few short letters, there was the unmistakeable impression of a campaign in full flow, sweeping the enemy aside with contemptuous ease, only for Howe to suddenly call a halt. Germain was then forced to wait almost two full months for a further report from Howe.[79] Once more, Germain received what must by now have been a familiar mixture of news. Howe started by apologising for his lack of communication, but considering Germain must have been fearful that nothing was happening in America, given the tone of Howe's last correspondence, he must have been relieved as Howe's letter of 30 November (received 29 December) continued. Howe, it transpired, had been busy. The disinclination to attempt anything more that campaign, manifested in his letter of 25 September, had apparently been replaced by a burst of renewed energy. Howe had manoeuvred the Americans off Manhattan, engaged them at White Plains and captured nearly 3,000 prisoners following a four-pronged assault on Fort Washington (the last remaining rebel position on Manhattan). A second rebel stronghold, Fort Lee (sited on the opposite bank of the Hudson and intended to work in conjunction with Fort Washington to prevent British ships from

[78] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 283-284, Howe to Germain, 25 Sep. 1776.
[79] Ibid., ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776. Received 29 December according to *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 353.

sailing up the river), had been taken as well, and Howe's letter ended with Cornwallis in pursuit of the retreating (and presumably demoralised) rebel army.[80] Once more Howe had presented a picture of uninterrupted successes against an enemy that seemed entirely incapable of mounting any serious resistance.

Germain was not allowed to enjoy the warm glow from this dizzying parade of military successes for long. The next day he received another letter from Howe. Once more, a puzzling, even baffling, full stop was being put to proceedings. Howe now reported that his men were on the verge of entering their winter quarters and the general was once more turning his thoughts to the following campaign. Just a day earlier Germain would have been able to conjure with images of Cornwallis pursuing a disintegrating rebel army, now he was asked to turn his mind to another campaign the next year.[81] It is clear that this is the point where Germain's patience started to run out. Some time later, when making notes in preparation for a possible inquiry into the running of the war, Germain's first point dealt with Howe's failure to follow up his success at White Plains and his subsequent failure to pursue Washington's army aggressively through New Jersey. By making this the first criticism of Howe's conduct, it is clear that Germain was satisfied with Howe's performance up to that point, or, at the very least, that he saw no possibility of attacking it with effect.[82]

Howe's letter, however, was far from finished. He went on to propose that an ambitious and aggressive campaign might end the rebellion in 1777.[83] This might have been enough to mollify Germain, until Howe proceeded to detail the forces he had in mind. Howe's plan for 1777 was indeed ambitious, calling for offensive

[80] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[81] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776. Received 30 December according to *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 361.
[82] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 89-90, 'Hints for the management of an intended enquiry', 1777 or 1778.
[83] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.

operations in at least four different areas throughout the year, in addition to the operations of the northern army. Rhode Island (to which Clinton and Percy were *en route* with 6,000 men as Howe wrote) was to form the base for a 12,000-strong army, 10,000 of which would threaten and possibly even take Boston. Another 10,000-strong strike force would make the long-awaited move up the Hudson in support of the northern army, with 5,000 left to garrison the city of New York. A corps of 8,000 would initially act defensively in New Jersey, switching to an offensive mode in the autumn, when it would attempt to take Philadelphia. South Carolina and Georgia could then be targeted in the winter. By attacking the rebels at so many points, this 35,000-strong army might have been up to the task of ending the rebellion in 1777 and the plan was certainly aggressive enough to please Germain, but Howe added that he would need 15,000 reinforcements (helpfully suggesting Russians or more Germans) to bring his army to that strength.[84] It was an unreasonable request given the difficulties of raising men for the 1776 campaign, and it alarmed Germain. The way he chose to handle it would trigger Howe's calamitous reaction, believing that he had lost the respect and confidence of the American Secretary.[85]

When considering Germain's reaction to Howe's request it is important to remember his first public statement as American Secretary – that he would let the commanders in the field decide how many men they needed and then provide them.[86] Knowing that Howe wanted just 20,000 men, this had been an easy promise to make, but his statement now placed him in an uncomfortable position. For several reasons, it was extremely unlikely that 15,000 reinforcements could be found quickly enough to be useful in the 1777 campaign. The expense of the war was already immense (and

[84] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[85] Ibid., CO 5/94, ff. 1-6, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777.
[86] Cobbet, ed., *Parliamentary History*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 989-991.

Germain's concerns on this point had already been expressed).[87] Recruiting in Britain had proved so hard that attempts had been made in 1775 to get the East India Company to suspend or limit its own recruiting activities. The attempt was unsuccessful, and at any rate, Lord North had only hoped to gain an extra thousand men through this method.[88] The possibility of substantial numbers of foreign soldiers seemed remote. The Russians had already proved unwilling to supply men and the Hessian option had been largely played out (only small numbers of extra Hessian troops would eventually be found for 1777).[89]

Although Germain's hands were, to a large extent, tied, it is not entirely fair to dismiss Howe's appeal for reinforcements as unreasonable. He had submitted a plan for approval and stated the number of men that would be required to carry it out. In his narrative, Howe stated that a simple response from Germain that it was not possible to find the men requested would have satisfied him.[90] Germain did not offer such a response, choosing instead to interpret the forces already with Howe in a different manner, offering only 7,800 reinforcements and claiming that this would bring Howe's army to 35,000.[91] Howe would later claim that it was this fudging of numbers that led him to believe that Germain had lost confidence in him.

> I began to entertain [an apprehension], that my opinions were no longer of weight, and that of course the confidence so necessary to the support, satisfaction, and indeed, security, of every man in a responsible situation, was withdrawn.[92]

[87] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 189-190, Germain to Howe, 21 Jun. 1776.
[88] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of King George III, Vol. III*, pp. 255-256, Lord North to King George III, 9 Sep. 1775; Ibid., pp. 260-261, North to George III, 19 Sep. 1775.
[89] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 106-109, Germain to Howe, 3 Mar. 1777.
[90] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 14.
[91] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 1-6, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777.
[92] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 14.

The situation at the end of the 1776 campaign is also interesting when compared with that a year later. Following the resignation of Howe and the elevation of Clinton, Germain wrote to his new commander-in-chief with details of extensive reinforcements to be sent to America.[93] Not all of the new men were earmarked for Clinton; following the surrender of Burgoyne's army at Saratoga, Britain had to reinforce Canada and there was also need for troops in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Florida. Even so, Germain spoke of new corps being voted by Parliament.[94] Various gentlemen of means, as well as cities including London and Bristol, had pledged to raise new regiments and help with recruitment for existing ones, while a new loan of £6,000,000 had been authorised to finance the war effort in the budget of March 1778.[95] In total, Germain promised as many as 12,000 new British soldiers, along with (probably) one or two more German regiments.[96] It is impossible not to notice that this would have come within touching distance of Howe's request for 15,000 men, made just over a year earlier, and it is reasonable to ask why such an effort could not have been made then. The obvious answer would seem to be that Germain had not anticipated such a large request and had not been planning for it. (In June 1775 he had commented to Lord Suffolk that it would not be possible to engage foreign troops for that year because of the length of time it took to organise their hire.)[97] Germain had intended the 1776 campaign to be decisive and to have ended the rebellion. He had given Howe a bigger army than had been requested and had expected him to destroy the rebel army. The sort of campaign Howe suggested in his

[93] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 94-99, Germain to Clinton, 8 Mar. 1778.
[94] Ibid.
[95] P. H. Stanhope, *History of England from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Versailles, 1713-1783*, Vol. VI, (London: John Murray, 1858), p. 218.
[96] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 94-99, Germain to Clinton, 8 Mar. 1778.
[97] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 2-3, Germain to Suffolk, 16 Jun. 1775.

letter of 30 November 1776, while a bold plan, was not what Germain had envisaged.[98] He simply had not considered that there would be a need for such extensive operations in 1777 and the slow-turning gears of the British war machine had not been set in motion early enough to make it a possibility. A year later, with the outcome of the struggle suddenly in doubt following Burgoyne's surrender, there was perhaps more of a mood for making a last serious exertion.

The 1777 campaign

Howe's letter of 30 November 1776 provided the outline for a bold strategy to take the war to the rebels in multiple theatres in 1777, but the campaign never came close to taking the form suggested.[99] Even before Germain had chance to reply, Howe was tinkering. On 20 December he submitted a second plan, in which hopes of substantial loyalist strength in Pennsylvania had led him to make that the principal objective for the campaign. Howe's revised plan had one major benefit; it could be put into action without any reinforcements. Assessing his strength at around 19,000, he proposed 10,000 to move on Philadelphia, with 4,000 garrisoning New York and 3,000 to act on the Hudson. Rhode Island was allocated a mere 2,000 men in this revised plan.[100]

Simply by comparing the division of forces it was clear that the Hudson strategy had been superseded in Howe's thinking by the move on Philadelphia. Howe actually went further. The 3,000 men earmarked for the Hudson were to act defensively, simply to cover New Jersey. Any cooperation with the northern army was limited to a vague proposal that it could 'facilitate, in some degree, the approach of the army from

[98] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[99] Ibid.
[100] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 371-372, Howe to Germain, 20 Dec. 1776.

Canada'.[101] Moreover, the Rhode Island element of the original plan had also overtaken the Hudson strategy in terms of priority; this was the first element that was to be reinstated when reinforcements arrived, meaning that any shortfall would be borne by the Hudson corps. In the original plan for 1777, a little less than 29 per cent (10,000 out of 35,000) of Howe's army had been allocated to an offensive move up the Hudson river, supposedly the keystone of the entire British strategy.[102] In the revised plan its allocation had dropped to less than 16 per cent (3,000 out of 19,000) and it was restricted to acting defensively. (It is worth noting that back in 1775, Howe's first plan to end the rebellion had allocated more than 63 per cent of his force, 12,000 out of a total of 19,000, for a move up the Hudson).[103] This percentage would inevitably drop further as reinforcements arrived and were directed to Rhode Island to restore the offensive from that base. This shift in emphasis had occurred without any input from Germain and while Howe still believed he had the full confidence of his political master.

Confusingly, Howe submitted a third plan for 1777 before receiving a reply to his first.[104] On 20 January he was full of gloom regarding a surprise attack on Trenton, in which a small American army had captured the entire Hessian garrison. This had been, Howe wrote, more damaging than he had first anticipated and he now believed 20,000 reinforcements for the following campaign would not be excessive, while 15,000 should be enough to give him superiority over the Americans. (Howe had previously mentioned reports that the rebels would field an army of up to 50,000 in the following campaign, a figure that turned out to be overestimated considerably. It is probable that Howe passed on this intelligence to bolster the strength of his

[101] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 371, Howe to Germain, 20 Dec. 1776.
[102] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[103] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775.
[104] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 377-378, Howe to Germain, 20 Jan. 1777.

request for reinforcements; it does not seem likely that he could have believed such a figure would actually materialise, given the size of the army that had faced him in 1776).[105] Even with this more extravagant reinforcement of 20,000, Philadelphia would remain his primary objective. He would use the extra 5,000 troops to attack Philadelphia from two sides at once, by dispatching a separate corps by sea. Pennsylvania was now firmly established in Howe's mind as the area where his main push would be made in 1777 and his letter included the familiar assertion that he could see no prospect of ending the war except by drawing the Americans into a general action. Germain may well have felt that Howe had been talking about that for a long time.[106]

There was still time for one more prod from Howe before he received Germain's response to his first plan. On 12 February he again expressed concern that the rebel army would number 50,000 in the coming campaign and, while claiming that he would not presume to press Germain on the need for the reinforcements he had outlined, he did just that.[107] Somewhere in the North Atlantic, this letter would have crossed paths with Germain's of 14 January, which reached Howe in New York on 9 March.[108] Germain's reply needs to be placed carefully in context. At the time he wrote it, he was unaware of the setback at Trenton and still held the hopeful vision of Cornwallis pursuing the rebels through New Jersey, communicated in one of Howe's letters from 30 November.[109] Germain chose to open with his approval of the move to take Rhode Island and the hope that Cornwallis would make rapid progress in his

[105] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776. Howe's first mention of a 50,000-strong rebel army was contained in this letter.
[106] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 377-378, Howe to Germain, 20 Jan. 1777.
[107] Ibid., pp. 378-379, Howe to Germain, 12 Feb. 1777.
[108] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 1-6, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777. Received 9 March according to *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 381.
[109] Ibid., CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.

pursuit of the rebels. When he mentioned Howe's plan, he limited himself to describing it as 'well digested,'[110] but declined to give an opinion until the King had considered it more fully (the plan had only been received in London two weeks previously). Germain's statement that further communication from Howe would probably add to his understanding of the situation in America can easily be interpreted as a hope that Howe might move away from such an extensive plan of his own accord.

Had Germain left matters there he may have had time to receive Howe's revised plan of 20 December (received in London on 23 February), before passing any substantial comment on the original plan. He had certainly offered a satisfactory reason for not offering an opinion one way or the other and it seems reasonable to suggest that Howe (knowing that he had already revised his plan considerably) would have been happy to wait for further feedback. Germain's decision to comment on Howe's request for 15,000 reinforcements is, therefore, almost inexplicable. He had no need to comment on this as he had already deferred passing judgement on the plan that gave rise to the request. Yet, he felt it necessary to inform Howe that he had been alarmed by the request and could see no way of satisfying it. Interestingly, this came very close to the mode of refusal (a simple statement that it was impossible to find so many men) that Howe later claimed would have been perfectly satisfactory to him.[111] However, Germain did not stop there. Using the returns submitted by Howe, he chose to interpret Howe's force as being close to 27,000. Howe would later claim that Germain must have included prisoners and the sick in his computations. Using this more optimistic reckoning, Germain calculated that reinforcements of 7,800 would

[110] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, f. 3, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777.
[111] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 14.

bring Howe's corps close to the requested 35,000.[112] Germain also wrote a second letter to Howe on 14 January, in which he appeared to be attempting to lay the groundwork for a defence of his belief that large reinforcements were not necessary or, at least, had not been anticipated. Thanking Howe for his provision of details on the losses, both in casualties and prisoners, sustained during the 1776 campaign, he remarked that he was very pleased to see that those losses had been so low.[113]

Germain's 'misconceived calculation'[114] on the matter of troop numbers prompted an extraordinary reaction from Howe. In his reply there was a clear sense that he was attempting to paint as bleak a picture as possible and the response was confused and emotional as he picked his comparison points.[115] Howe sometimes referred to his original plan, sometimes to his revised plan and even, on one occasion, made a reference to his third plan (which had called for a reinforcement of 20,000).[116] Howe betrayed a lack of subtlety here. In his letter, Germain had made explicit reference to his hope that Howe would submit revised plans; he clearly had not yet received that written by Howe on 20 December and obviously could not have received that of 20 January. Still, Howe used both of these revised plans as reference points when it suited him in his attempt to make the smaller number of reinforcements offered seem as damaging as possible.[117] He declared the Boston offensive would have to be relinquished, even though he had already willingly postponed it in his revised plan. He then claimed that his reduced reinforcements would somehow force him to invade Pennsylvania by sea, overlooking the fact that an early invasion of

[112] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 1-6, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777.
[113] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 384-385, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777.
[114] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 10.
[115] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777; *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 390, Distribution of His Majesty's Troops, enclosed in Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.
[116] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 377-378, Howe to Germain, 20 Jan. 1777.
[117] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.

Pennsylvania had first been suggested in his second plan, which Germain was evidently unaware of. Moreover, that plan had not required any reinforcements at all and so could not have been adversely affected by Germain's reply. Most remarkably, Howe then made an oblique reference to his third plan. This scheme, dependent on a reinforcement of 20,000 men, had mooted the launching of a secondary invasion of Pennsylvania by sea.[118] Howe lamented that Germain's failure to provide the reinforcements requested would force him to abandon New Jersey, pointing out that in his previous plan that would not have been the case and would have left Washington's army between the two British corps moving on Philadelphia. This can only be a reference to the additional seaborne corps of his third plan, which Germain would not receive until 3 March. To weaken further the prospect of any activity on the Hudson, Howe declared that the men to act defensively on the river would now be composed entirely of provincials under Governor Tryon. Only 3,200 British troops would be based at New York, with 300 on Paulus Hook, 1,200 on Staten Island and 2,400 at Rhode Island. The force for the invasion of Pennsylvania would number 11,000.[119] In a return of his strength, enclosed with this letter, Howe pointed out that prisoners and the sick were not included (neither were artillery and cavalry) and calculated his strength at 18,100, plus the 3,000 provincials.[120]

As well as this ripping up of the plans for 1777, Howe claimed he would now need to start his campaign later than planned, due to the need to evacuate New Jersey, and he made repeated and pointed references to 'small reinforcement' and 'want of forces,'[121] adding that while his numbers had been adequate to his needs for 1776,

[118] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 377-378, Howe to Germain, 20 Jan. 1777.
[119] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.
[120] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 390, Distribution of His Majesty's Troops, enclosed in Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.
[121] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.

they would not be so for the following campaign. He even suggested that when reinforcements did arrive, some of them would be needed to strengthen his main army in its move against Philadelphia, which would otherwise be too weak to make rapid progress, completely ignoring the fact that he now proposed to invade Pennsylvania with 11,000 men, while his second plan had originally called for just 10,000. To cap off his letter he added that there was no longer any hope of ending the rebellion in 1777.

One further point adds to the sense that Howe was overreacting. His third plan had included an intriguing paragraph at the end, in which he had stated exactly what the consequences would be of a smaller than expected number of reinforcements. Less reinforcements than he had requested (ideally 20,000, but 15,000 would suffice), would necessitate a reduction in the scope of his plans. No reinforcements at all would force him to limit offensive operations to a single body of troops in New Jersey, with a small corps at Rhode Island and a purely defensive force at New York.[122] Germain's response promised nearly 8,000 reinforcements, yet Howe reacted as if he had been promised none at all, limiting the New York and Rhode Island corps to defensive duties. In fact, he went even further, declaring he would be forced to abandon New Jersey and go to Pennsylvania by sea.[123]

Howe's letter is a remarkable piece of evidence. It is manifestly unfair to Germain and appears to seek to make an admittedly less-than-perfect scenario appear even worse. It must be remembered that Germain was still promising a substantial reinforcement of nearly 8,000 men. Howe might have been expected to adopt his own revised plan, simply postponing either the Boston offensive or the move up the

[122] *Parliamentary History*, Vol. X, pp. 377-378, Howe to Germain, 20 Jan. 1777.
[123] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 1-6, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777.

Hudson until the 7,800 reinforcements arrived. Howe could not have been offended by a failure to provide as many men as he had wished for; it was not as if they had been promised and then not delivered. The only thing he could have truly been offended by was the manner in which Germain attempted to contradict his own assessment of the current strength of his army, and even then he could have chosen to view it as a clumsy attempt by Germain to avoid disappointing his general. Instead, he viewed it as evidence of a loss of confidence in his own abilities and a lack of respect for his opinions. Howe's reaction was so extreme, and so palpably unfair, that it seems possible that he was already harbouring severe doubts about his ability to win the war. His dismantling of what had once been an ambitious and aggressive campaign, when in reality he only needed to concentrate his forces more narrowly (along lines he himself had already suggested), was self-destructive and his letter was clearly intended to be 'exhibit A' in the case for his defence.

That defence was to be strengthened by a letter to Sir Guy Carleton in Canada, in which Howe cited the weakness of his army as the reason why he would not be able to devote a corps of men to offensive operations on the Hudson.[124] Once more, Howe was twisting facts to suit his ends. He had chosen to prioritise an offensive into Pennsylvania and had even elevated an offensive from Rhode Island over the original plan to link up with the northern army. This had been done prior to any news on the numbers of reinforcements he could expect. Even when he was made aware that those numbers would be lower than hoped for, he had the option of using the bulk of his army to move up the Hudson, or to at least prioritise the reduced number of reinforcements for that operation when they arrived. Germain's letter was in no way instrumental in Howe's decision to abandon the Hudson strategy. He simply chose not

[124] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 389-390, Howe to Sir Guy Carleton, 5 Apr. 1777.

to follow it and his letter to Carleton (a copy of which was pointedly sent to Germain)[125] was notice that he was absolving himself of any responsibility for it.

The rupture between Howe and Germain was probably irreparable by now, but any chance of a reconciliation was snuffed out by Germain's next messages. As he wrote, on 3 March, he had before him reports of the disaster at Trenton and a further action at Princeton in which the rebels had got the better of British forces. Already feeling that Germain had lost confidence in him, Howe might have noted an edge to Germain's letter, in which he lamented that any lustre should have been taken off Howe's campaign by the setback at Trenton. The American Secretary went on to impress upon Howe the need to treat the rebels more harshly, suggesting that the colonists would need to be made to suffer before they would submit.[126] In a separate letter of the same day, Germain made his official response to Howe's submitted plans for 1777. Now being in possession of the revised plan, he completely ignored the original extensive proposal (again making it impossible not to wonder why he had chosen to comment on it in his letter of 14 January). Germain signalled the King's satisfaction with the scaled down plan and again pressed the issue of waging a more punitive war, calling for raids upon the New England coastline. Howe would have been disappointed by the news that his expectations regarding reinforcements were to be reduced even more. Germain once more attempted to blur the matter, referring only to the 3,000 Hessians he had promised Howe in his letter of 14 January (he had actually promised 4,000, plus 800 Hessian chasseurs and 1,200 Hessian recruits), and saying he would only be able to provide 1,280. He still hoped to find the 800 requested Hessian chasseurs, plus 400 more from Hanau, but the 1,800 British recruits had melted away to just four companies of Highlanders, amounting to 400 men. In

[125] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.
[126] Ibid., ff. 104-105, Germain to Howe, 3 Mar. 1777.

total, Howe was now being offered just 2,900 reinforcements.[127] This time, however, Germain made no effort to persuade Howe that he was being given what he had asked for, perhaps realising that any such effort would be farcical considering he was now offering such paltry numbers.

The further reduction in the number of reinforcements to be provided gave Howe firmer ground for his belief that Germain had lost confidence in him. He had already reacted badly to proposed reinforcements of less than 8,000. Now he was to get less than 3,000. Germain may have had a case that raising 15,000 new troops and delivering them to America in time to make a difference in the 1777 campaign would have proved extremely difficult. To offer as few as 2,900 strongly suggests that he simply did not believe Howe really needed any more.

Germain's disappointing letters arrived in New York on 8 May. Howe now had consent to go ahead with his scaled-down campaign, but the reinforcements that could have been used to resurrect one of the other two offensives later in the year had been severely constricted, making it unlikely that any significant operations could take place in more than one theatre. With Pennsylvania now Howe's chosen focus, and with approval from Germain, the Hudson strategy was moribund. It is therefore easy to pinpoint March 1777 as the time when British strategy for winning the war went hopelessly awry. Three weeks after approving Howe's plan to move the bulk of his force on Philadelphia (and after admitting that reinforcements for the campaign would be few), Germain wrote to Carleton in Canada to reiterate that the northern army, now operating under Burgoyne, was to push southwards down the Hudson river and link up with Howe. Germain went so far as to state that 'it is become highly necessary that

[127] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 106-109, Germain to Howe, 3 Mar. 1777.

the most speedy junction of the two armies should be effected,'[128] yet under the newly authorised plan, Howe would not be providing an army to push northwards to meet Burgoyne.

The many failures of British planning here have been well documented and examined.[129] More important in the context of this thesis is the breakdown in Howe's confidence that he was being supported fully by Germain. By 7 July he was in a defensive frame of mind, seeking to add layers to his defence in advance of what he now appeared to consider a campaign that was unlikely to produce any significant advances. He begged to inform Germain that the war was now on a much bigger scale, that the Americans had improved greatly as soldiers and were now benefitting from the experience of French officers. They had also, according to reports, recently received 50 brass cannon at Boston, giving them a strong artillery train. In what must have been simply an attempt to get another request on record (he surely could not have believed it was possible) he asked for 10,000 Russians and suggested that such a reinforcement would make it possible to end the rebellion in another campaign, although he was not clear if he meant the upcoming 1777 campaign or the following year. Finally, to be on the record once more about his plans regarding cooperation with the northern army, he confirmed that Clinton would be ordered to act defensively with his small corps at New York and that the principal purpose of that corps was to hold New York. Perhaps to shift responsibility, Clinton would be given the power to act as he saw fit considering changing circumstances.[130]

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[128] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 400-404, Germain to Sir Guy Carleton, 26 Mar. 1777.
[129] See Willcox, 'Too Many Cooks'; W. H. Moomaw, 'The Denouement of General Howe's Campaign of 1777', *The English Historical Review*, 79 (312) (Jul., 1964), pp. 498–512; J. Clark, 'Responsibility for the Failure of the Burgoyne Campaign', *The American Historical Review*, 35 (3) (Apr. 1930), pp. 542–559.
[130] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 411-413, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1777.

Howe's intentions were made even more clear in a letter of 16 July (received by Germain on 22 August, along with that of 7 July).[131] Here, Howe remarked that Washington's movements suggested he was trying to get between the two British armies, to frustrate any effort they might make to link up on the Hudson. Howe's response to this was notable for its detachment. It would, he stated: 'no further affect my proceeding to Pennsylvania than to make a small change in the distribution of the troops'.[132] He anticipated that the greatest impediment Burgoyne would experience in moving southwards was the difficulty in moving his supplies through difficult terrain.

Communication between Howe and Germain was now completely dysfunctional, as each man persisted with his own agenda without properly listening to what was coming back from the other. Howe had repeatedly asked for more reinforcements, while Germain had persisted in his attempts to get Howe to act with more aggression. At the same time, Howe had dismantled the keystone of the British strategy, while Germain had insisted he had enough men to enact his most ambitious schemes. Finally, despite Howe repeatedly making it clear that he expected no decisive outcome to the campaign, as late as 18 May Germain was able to express his disappointment that Howe felt his force was insufficient for the following campaign at the same time as professing his belief that the war could still be ended that year.[133]

Howe's defence of his conduct in 1779 went into some detail on this exchange of letters from the end of 1776 into the summer of 1777, an exchange that marked the breakdown of a working relationship between two men who had apparently not understood each other properly from the start. Howe's confusion came through clearly in the draft of his narrative, showing how he was unsure of the exact numbers

[131] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 414-415, Howe to Germain, 16 Jul. 1777.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid., pp. 416-417, Germain to Howe, 18 May 1777.

of troops promised and received. As he wrestled with the numbers (originally claiming he had received just an eighth of the force he had requested, before changing it to a fifth, then claiming that only 2,000 of the promised 2,900 reinforcements had actually arrived), figures in the draft are repeatedly struck through and revised. Finally, Henry Strachey's hand appears in the margin asking 'were the 2,000 arrived?',[134] suggesting that he was also struggling to follow Howe's computations.

Betraying a lack of skill for political infighting, Howe attempted to pour scorn on Germain's persisting optimism that the war could be ended in 1777, commenting in condescending terms how anyone, even someone with less military experience than Germain, could understand that while an army might be sufficient for one campaign, it would not necessarily be so for the next.

> … the force which had been sufficient to take possession of New York, and other strongholds of the enemy, could not, after the necessary divisions for preserving the variety of posts we had gained, be equally suitable to the making of new conquests. For is it not self evident, that the power of an army must diminish in proportion to the decrease of their numbers? And must not their numbers for the field necessarily decrease, in proportion to the towns, posts, or forts which we take, and are obliged to preserve?[135]

Germain, eager by then for the whole affair to be brushed away quickly and quietly so as to draw as little attention as possible to his own performance in office, did not offer the obvious rebuttal to Howe on this point. Howe was not meant to have waged a war of conquest. He was not meant to have taken towns, posts and forts. He was meant to have targeted and destroyed the rebel army. Howe's clumsy defence of his term as commander-in-chief suggests that, more than two years after his relationship with Germain had soured, Howe still did not properly understand what had gone wrong.

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[134] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 34.
[135] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 13-14.

IV

Howe's experience

Howe has presented an easy target for historians. Safe in the knowledge that he failed to defeat the rebel army under Washington, he has been pilloried as incompetent, stupid, dull, unimaginative and lazy.[1] Any attempt to get an idea of the personal qualities of the man is hindered by the lack of primary source material that might have cast a little extra light on some of his most contentious decisions. Howe's only biographer, Bellamy Partridge, opened his work with Howe's arrival in Boston in 1775 and offered only the briefest flashbacks to add a few details to his life before that, but to be fair, very little is known about his early years.[2] The same holds true for the bulk of Howe's private life – the lack of papers making it extremely difficult to make an assessment of his personal qualities. The accepted picture of Howe has become something of a caricature, with some historians feeling no need to dwell on such well-known characteristics. Weldon A. Brown wrote that Howe 'needs no identification in this study because his traits, good and bad, have often been set forth'.[3] Physically, he is generally portrayed as having been tall and swarthy, although it is uncertain where this originated. Primary source materials do not make reference to his physical appearance and references in secondary works draw almost exclusively from earlier histories.[4] It is more certain that he was a *bon viveur*, his love of the

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[1] Cullum, "Struggle for the Hudson", p. 291; Belcher, *First American Civil War*, p. 161; Lodge, *Story of the Revolution*, p. 201; H. B. Wheatley, ed., *The Historical and the Posthumous Memoirs of Sir Nathaniel William Wraxall*, Vol. I (London: Bickers & Son, 1884), pp. 356-357.
[2] Partridge, *Sir Billy Howe*, pp. 9-13.
[3] Brown, W. A., *Empire or Independence: A Study of the Failure of Reconciliation, 1774-1783* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1966), p. 81.
[4] Ibid., p. 4; Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 56; D. H. Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 69.

social scene being recorded by his Hessian aide, von Muenchhausen.[5] He is not credited with being a great intellect or an innovative thinker on strategy or tactics, but he is generally agreed to have been brave and a strong leader of men and his prowess with light troops was demonstrated by his training camp at Salisbury.[6] Some historians have attempted to fill in the gaps of this description, Fischer portraying Howe as a melancholy figure attempting to blot out the horrors of war through over-indulgence in drinking, eating, gambling and womanising. Although this is not an unreasonable supposition (and the assessment of the rebel general Charles Lee bears some similarity to Fischer's), there is nothing but circumstantial evidence to back it up.[7]

Our understanding of Howe draws mainly on his military service in North America, and it is inevitably coloured by the knowledge of his ultimate failure. It is therefore easy for any explanations Howe offered for his decisions to be brushed aside. His failure to attack at Brooklyn and White Plains in 1776, his decision to focus his efforts on Pennsylvania in 1777 and his apparent abandonment of Burgoyne that year all appear disastrous when viewed as part of an ultimately unsuccessful strategy. Howe has been described as nothing more than a conventional eighteenth-century general, acting within the confines of his own military education.[8] There may not be enough documents to construct a psychological study of Howe, as Wyatt and Willcox did with Clinton, but it is possible to consider his experiences and at least attempt to

[5] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, 18 Jan. 1777, p. 9.
[6] Lee, C., *Anecdotes of the Late Charles Lee, Esq.*, Second Edition (London: Printed for J. S. Jordan, 1797), pp. 422-425, Charles Lee to Benjamin Rush, 4 Jun. 1778.
[7] Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, pp. 72-73.
[8] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, p. 188; Billias, (ed.) *George Washington's Generals and Opponents*, pp. xix–xx; Jones, 'Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist', in *George Washington's Generals and Opponents*, ed. Billias, p. 49.

come to a better understanding of the man behind the decisions.[9] The draft of his narrative again offers valuable new information in this regard, but even without this it is possible to see a pattern in Howe's behaviour and to come to new conclusions on his decision-making processes.

Although Howe's leadership was often open to criticism, the charge of outright incompetence (made most notably in the bitter pamphlet war following his period in command),[10] does not seem to be justified. It is true that he displayed some of the attributes highlighted by Norman Dixon in his study of the phenomenon (passivity and indecisiveness, a lack of creativity, a tendency towards procrastination) but many others were absent (an underestimation of the enemy, an inability to learn from mistakes and a love of the frontal assault).[11] Dixon also outlined a further characteristic of the incompetent general: an imperviousness to the loss and suffering of the rank and file *or* a level of compassion that hindered operations. Dixon's meaning here was that a general must not callously throw the lives of his men away, but nor can he hope to keep them entirely safe from harm. One of the greatest difficulties faced by a commander is judging when he must risk his men's lives for the overall aim of the war. Howe certainly appeared to value the lives of his men, demonstrated by his repeated urgings to maintain discipline and avoid unnecessary casualties, but whether this was taken to the extreme and became an impediment to action is open to debate.[12] He obviously was not totally averse to ordering them into action, as engagements at (among others) Long Island, White Plains and Fort Washington prove.

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[9] Wyatt and Willcox, 'A Psychological Exploration in History', pp. 3–26.
[10] Examples include Galloway, *Letters to a Nobleman*, p. 60; Mauduit, *Strictures on the Philadelphia Mischianza*), p. 5.
[11] Dixon, N., *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Pimlico, 1994), p. 67.
[12] WCL, *William Howe Orderly Book*, 17 Sep. 1776 & 24 Oct. 1776; WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers, Loftus Cliffe to Jack Cliffe, Camp on New York Island, 21 Sep. 1776.

Intriguingly, Dixon highlighted a key failure in the Second Boer War (in which Sir Redvers Buller earned his place in the pantheon of incompetent generals) that chimes almost perfectly with Howe's period in command over a hundred years earlier. On Buller, Dixon wrote: 'His first step towards disaster was to shelve the official British strategy'.[13] By unilaterally abandoning the Hudson strategy in 1777, Howe contributed to Burgoyne's defeat, which, arguably, turned what was still a winnable war into an unwinnable one. Dixon also suggested that the militarily incompetent general tends to be overly sensitive to criticism, which could be argued in Howe's case. His extreme reaction to Germain's failure to provide him with the reinforcements he requested at the end of 1776 certainly appears to be a case of over-sensitivity.[14] Dixon identified the eighteenth century as a time when war was evolving and becoming more complex, adding new areas of potential failure in terms of planning and logistics.[15] Although Howe's failures stand out most starkly on the battlefields of America, his excruciating slowness to move was also a factor in the frustration of the British strategy. As early as 1903, Henry Cabot Lodge was able to remark on Howe taking two months to advance 30 miles.[16] The logistical efforts involved in preparing for the offensive on Long Island, the landing on Manhattan and the 1777 invasion of Pennsylvania were immense and it seems beyond doubt that Howe struggled to cope with them. The tortuously long voyage to Philadelphia in 1777, in which many of his army's horses died and the majority of the remainder were severely debilitated, is a clear indication of a failure in planning. Von Muenchhausen noted that the horses had been given very little space on board the ships because a short journey had been expected, while Loftus Cliffe reported that his

[13] Dixon, *Military Incompetence*, p. 56.
[14] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.
[15] Dixon, *Military Incompetence*, p. 245 & p. 20.
[16] Lodge, *The Story of the Revolution*, p. 201.

regiment embarked at New York on 9 July, but did not sail until 23 July, claiming, 'that interval was taken up only in consuming our fresh stock, very scantily laid in indeed'.[17] The horses had begun to die by 7 August, and by 27 August even the survivors were not fit for service. Overall, around 400 horses (both wagon stock and cavalry mounts) were lost.[18]

Studies of generalship through the ages do not include Howe among their subjects, but can still offer illumination. Keegan's *The Mask of Command* jumps rather jarringly from Alexander the Great to Wellington, leaving a 2,000-year gap between the heroic and anti-heroic leadership styles embodied by each. Keegan accepted the notion of intrinsic qualities in generals throughout the history of warfare, but saw the differing circumstances in which each fought as an overriding factor.[19] Howe's lead-from-the-front style, exhibited on the ascent to the Plains of Abraham in 1754, Bunker Hill in 1775 and even (as shall be seen) Long Island in 1776, was closer to Alexander's than Wellington's. Howe was obviously not as reckless as Alexander, but that was mainly due to the fact that, by the eighteenth century, generals were no longer expected to launch themselves into the mêlée. Even so, and although Howe did not actually charge into the enemy's ranks, he still went too far in this regard, eliciting concern from subordinates that he was putting his personal safety at risk and drawing a mild reproof from Germain following the Battle of Long Island.[20] Germain's wording was important in this respect. Stating that Howe had proved his courage before, he claimed he was now too important to risk himself in battle. No such reproof had followed the Battle of Bunker Hill, where it appears every member of Howe's

[17] WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers, Loftus Cliffe to Jack Cliffe, 24 Oct. 1777.
[18] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 23, p. 26 & p. 28.
[19] J. Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 1.
[20] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 32; Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 42-43, Germain to Howe, 18 Oct. 1776.

staff was killed or wounded, leaving him spattered with blood and, at one point, standing alone on the battlefield.[21] Howe may have had difficulty in modifying his behaviour when in overall command. He disliked the deference that came his way as commander-in-chief (as he revealed in conversation with Clinton) and the comment from Gruber that he was more suited to command of a regiment than that of an army holds weight because of this.[22]

Close analysis of documents, including new evidence in the draft of his narrative, suggests Howe was an even more cautious commander than is generally believed and that his emotions were often volatile.[23] There is also strong evidence to suggest that he was lacking in political astuteness. His frequent ill-judged statements, his terribly botched handling of his own inquiry (his narrative was hopelessly inadequate to rescue his reputation and his questioning of supposedly sympathetic witnesses was weak) and his own temper meant that he was sometimes his own worst enemy.[24] He was certainly naïve in his correspondence and his reputation might have been completely destroyed during the inquiry had his opponents made a systematic and concerted effort to lay the blame for the failure to end the rebellion squarely at his feet.

The most compelling assessment to come from one of Howe's contemporaries was that of the former British general Charles Lee, who fought for the Americans during the revolution and was a prisoner of Howe's for some time, having been

[21] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, p. 11.
[22] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 26, Memo of conversation with Howe, 6 Jul. 1777; Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 57.
[23] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative.
[24] Howe, *Narrative*; *Parliamentary Register; or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons during the Fifth Session of the Fourteenth Parliament of Great Britain*, Vol. XII (London: Wilson and Co. 1802), pp. 1-99, Howe Inquiry evidence.

captured by British dragoons on 13 December 1776.[25] Lee's opinion of Howe, contained in a private letter, is remarkable for its subtlety and complexity. Lee avoided broad brush strokes, refusing to present a caricature. Though critical of many aspects of Howe's character, he also scrupulously noted the admirable qualities as well. Lee admitted to liking Howe from the moment he first met him, finding him 'friendly, candid, good natured, brave, and rather sensible than the reverse'.[26] On the debit side, Howe was lazy, poorly educated (although Lee commented that this was common, even fashionable, at the time) and completely unequipped, intellectually, for the job of commander-in-chief. Lee believed that Howe was a good man placed in a bad situation. Given that Lee served with the Americans it is understandable that he would consider the British cause to have been suspect, but it is interesting to read that he believed Howe was unable to follow anything other than the simplest line of reasoning, concluding that the war must be just because the desire for it flowed down from the King, through government, and on to the armed forces, who could do nothing but obey.[27] (Lee may have been harsh on Howe in this respect, as the line of reasoning alluded to was far from unreasonable; Howe in fact used just that excuse, the inability to disobey an order, when defending his decision to serve in America having previously assured his constituents in Nottingham that he would never do so.)[28] Lee went on to claim that Howe had actually come to the realisation (he was writing in June 1778) that he had been employed in an indefensible policy.[29]

[25] C. Lee, *Anecdotes of the Late Charles Lee, Esq.*, Second Edition (London: Printed for J. S. Jordan, 1797), pp. 422-425, Charles Lee to Benjamin Rush, 4 Jun. 1778; Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, 18 Jan. 1777, p. 7.
[26] Ibid., p. 423.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Jones, 'Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist', p. 45.
[29] Lee, *Anecdotes*, pp. 424-425.

Henry Clinton's opinion on Howe was equally complex. Willcox suggested that Clinton actually indulged in a form of hero worship where Howe was concerned, but this does not seem to be borne out by Clinton's frequent venomous jottings.[30] In one of the most bitter of these he declared, 'I do not esteem the man I serve under,'[31] but, in a personal letter from 1778, Clinton put forward a theory that the Howe brothers together were far more formidable than when separate, going so far as to label them irresistible, suggesting more admiration for Howe's qualities than he had shown previously. It is also possible that Clinton was referring mainly to the harmonious relationship between the army and navy ensured by having the brothers in the respective commands, harmony that Clinton (following his southern expedition of 1776) was all too aware could not be taken for granted.[32]

Howe's early life

Howe's education included several years at Eton.[33] Despite this, Partridge claimed that Howe was not proficient in Latin or Greek (stating that the various Latin elements of the extravagant event staged to mark his handing over command of the army in 1778 would have been incomprehensible to him).[34] This seems questionable, given that the learning of Latin and Greek was practically the only education delivered at Eton at the time. As part of a 17-hour working week, the boys would spend seven hours reciting Latin and Greek and 10 hours translating. Work would include Latin composition and upper school boys were encouraged to read widely during their free time. Progress from one year to the next was dependent on passing

[30] Willcox, *Portrait of a General*, p. 66.
[31] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XIX, f. 34, Clinton memo (partly in cipher), 1776.
[32] Ibid., Vol. XXX, f. 20, Clinton to Benjamin Carter, 1 Jan. 1778.
[33] Cust, L., *A History of Eton College* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), p. 112.
[34] Partridge, *Sir Bill Howe*, pp. 227-229.

an examination of the works they had studied the previous year and failure would lead to being 'kept back', which was considered shameful. Howe did not go on to study at university, so it is possible that he failed to make much progress through his years at Eton, but it is equally possible that he simply wanted to proceed with a career in the army as soon as possible. Neither of his older brothers (who both also attended Eton) went on to university.[35]

Howe's attendance at Eton (he left to become a Cornet in the 15th Dragoons in 1746, at the age of 17)[36] coincided with the last days of a barbarous practice known as the 'ram hunt', in which a horde of students would chase a ram through the streets of Eton and Windsor and batter it to death with cudgels. By the time Howe reached Eton the practice had been modified, but not out of any squeamishness over the treatment of the ram. It was the boys' health that was the concern. Considering it dangerous for them to exert themselves too severely during the summer months, the ram was hamstrung and then beaten to death. The ram hunt was abolished the year after Howe left Eton and is revealing of opinions prevalent at the time; physical exertion was viewed with suspicion.[37] Lyte noted a tendency in society to be both late to bed and late to rise, and this characteristic was reported in Howe himself. (The naval captain Andrew Snape Hamond was appalled to discover, on reaching the *Eagle* at 10am for a conference with the Howe brothers, that William was still in bed.)[38] At Eton, the boys would be able to lay in bed until nine o'clock on school holidays. The worry that they should not overexert themselves in hot weather is also important and ties in with Howe's concerns in this respect while commanding in America. Eton does not,

[35] Lyte, H. C. M., *A History of Eton College, 1440–1875* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1875), pp. 311-320. Cust, *History of Eton College*, pp. 143-144.
[36] Jones, 'Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist', p. 43.
[37] Lyte, *History of Eton College,* pp. 302-303.
[38] Moomaw, 'Denouement of General Howe's Campaign', p. 503.

therefore, appear to have been a particularly taxing environment in the eighteenth century. A 17-hour working week, long lie-ins and a wariness of exertion in hot weather would not necessarily have instilled a tendency towards indolence in Howe, but they would have done little to dispel one that was already there.[39]

Howe's military education

Despite Howe's alleged connections with royalty (his grandmother had been a mistress of George I and his mother, Mary Sophia Kielmansegge, was believed to be an illegitimate sister to George II) his military career was impressive enough to need no help from a royal patron. Having started service as a cornet in 1746, he made lieutenant the following year before switching to the 20th Regiment, where he served under James Wolfe.[40] Howe's qualities as a soldier became discernible during the French and Indian War (1754-63), in which he served with some distinction. His leadership of the light troops that scaled the Heights of Abraham in 1759, and his solid performance in the battle for Quebec that followed, earned him recognition as an officer of great potential and he emerged from the war with a reputation for expertise in light infantry tactics.[41]

Experiences in the 1762 siege of Havana were also important. In the Havana campaign, Howe was put in command of an elite unit, but it was composed of two grenadier battalions, rather than light infantry.[42] Under the command of George, the 3rd Earl of Albermarle, Howe received an education in a different form of warfare

[39] Lyte, *History of Eton College,* p. 312.
[40] Jones, 'Sir William Howe: Conventional Strategist', p. 43.
[41] E. Salmon, *General Wolfe* (Toronto: Cassell & Company, 1909), pp. 212-214; Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 2-3, Lord George Germain to Lord Suffolk, 16 Jun. 1775.
[42] Greentree, D., *A Far-Flung Gamble, Havana 1762*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2010), p. 20.

from the one he had experienced under the mercurial Wolfe in Canada. Albermarle was cautious and opted for a siege rather than risk a potentially costly assault on the Spanish defences at Havana.[43] Howe was also part of the force, nearly 4,000 strong, that landed on a Cuban beach in two waves of flat-bottomed boats (Howe had the distinction of leading his grenadiers in the centre of the first wave).[44] He showed his ability to learn from his experiences when making a request for flat-bottomed boats in 1775. Suggesting that they should be made slightly smaller than those employed during the previous war, he declared that this would make them sturdier and therefore more reliable.[45]

Howe performed well at Havana, feeling out Spanish defences at La Cabaña during the night of 8 June and unsettling the defenders to the point that they spiked many of their guns and abandoned their position, leaving only militia behind, while on 15 June he was entrusted with the critical mission of securing a water supply for the besieging army, at Chorera.[46] Clearly, Howe was something of a rising star. It is possible, however, that his abiding memory of the Havana campaign would have been the terrible effects of sickness. In an operation that saw the army lose 560 men killed or fatally wounded in action, more than 4,700 died from disease, perhaps making his refusal to start offensive operations around New York in the summer of 1776 until the necessary camp equipage had arrived from England more understandable.[47] Among the British forces at Havana was the Connecticut Brigade, a force of provincials whose sufferings during the epidemic were recounted in Gothic style by the Reverend

[43]Greentree, *A Far-Flung Gamble*, p. 34; J. Corbett, *England in the Seven Years' War: A Study in Combined Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), pp. 276-277.
[44] Greentree, *A Far-Flung Gamble*, p. 36.
[45] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, f. 6, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775.
[46] Corbett, *England in the Seven Years' War*, p. 272; Greentree, *A Far-Flung Gamble,* p. 42 & p. 46.
[47] Corbett, *England in the Seven Years' War*, p. 272 & p. 282; (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 228-230, Howe to Germain, 6 Aug. 1776.

John Graham. The brigade included the 1st Connecticut Regiment, six companies of troops from New York, three from Rhode Island, two from New Jersey, four independent companies and two companies of 'Gorham Rangers'.[48] Just 13 years later, Howe would be leading British troops against men from the same colonies and, in some cases, the same men themselves; Israel and Rufus Putnam, who went on to hold prominent positions in the rebel army during the revolution, were both present at Havana.[49]

Howe's aims

It is impossible not to wonder, considering his sluggishness of movement, failure to commit to a decisive battle and general pessimism, exactly what Howe hoped to achieve by gaining command of the British army. Yet it is beyond doubt that he wanted the command, as his letter to his brother (15 June 1775), carefully outlining an attractive and simple strategy for Germain's attention, demonstrated.[50] This is an area where the lack of primary sources is a real and insurmountable impediment to our understanding of Howe. He may have genuinely believed he could end the war as easily as he professed in the letter to his brother. He may not have given the matter much thought at all (there was nothing new in the strategy he outlined), or might have considered the rebels to be an insignificant opponent and focussed instead on the laurels to be won by a swift quelling of the rebellion. As seen in Chapter 1, British officers saw no shame in plainly stating their desires for advancement in the army,

[48] J. Graham, *Extracts from the Journal of the Reverend John Graham, Chaplain of the First Connecticut Regiment at the Siege of Havana* (New York: Society of Colonial Wars, 1896), p. 10.
[49] I. Putnam, *The Two Putnams: Israel and Rufus in the Havana Expedition 1762 and in the Mississippi River Exploration 1772-73, with some account of the Company of Military Adventurers*, (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1931).
[50] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775.

and he may have simply viewed the command as the next step upwards on the ladder of his military experience. Howe does not appear to have been as demanding on this front as many of his fellow officers, but there were occasions when he revealed that he harboured his own ambitions. Notable in this respect was his gloomy musing on the possibility of storming a rebel position at Phip's Farm, which would (he believed) be viewed as merely 'a victory of cannon,'[51] and would therefore not bring him any honour. Clinton, at the time, made the remark that any victory was worthwhile, but it is interesting to note that Howe felt unmotivated to take military action if it was unlikely to bring him personal honour.

Howe also betrayed an uncertainty over his position should he join forces with Carleton's army along the Hudson during the 1776 campaign – a critical point when that was the keystone of the strategy for the year. Howe was concerned that linking up with another British army might diminish his role and even lead to his being superseded by a superior officer (as Carleton was). To Germain, on 12 May 1776, Howe stated that he believed a junction with the second British army on the Hudson was one of the key targets for the campaign to come.[52] Less than a month later, on 7 June, he expressed doubts about the mechanics of such a link-up. Despite claiming to have no problem with the idea of working under a superior officer, he suggested writing to Carleton to reassure him of this fact, strongly implying that the circumstances of such a junction were very much on his mind. He went on to point out that he would hope to still be able to run his own army after the junction and even suggested that they might remain in separate camps. On the possibility of Carleton

[51] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 40, Conversation with William Howe, 1775.
[52] Lomas, ed., *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville,* Vol. II, p. 31, William Howe to George Germain, 12 May 1776.

redistributing regiments within the combined army, Howe stated that he believed this would not be possible without his consent.[53]

The motivation for this letter to Germain stemmed from the news that two regiments, the 29th and 47th, had arrived at Quebec earlier than expected, along with Burgoyne and equipment necessary for crossing large bodies of water.[54] Howe clearly felt that the northern army was about to move and might do so quickly. His concerns about losing his authority when linking up with Carleton, despite his protestations to the contrary, are clear and it is interesting to note that Howe himself made no effort whatsoever, in either of the two campaigns in which he commanded, to move up the Hudson.

One final factor must be considered when assessing what Howe had hoped to achieve by taking the reins of command. His position as peace commissioner as well as commander-in-chief suggests that he may have harboured hopes of negotiating a peaceful settlement. How realistic those hopes were is debateable, but the peace commission (in which Howe served in tandem with his brother) could offer little that might tempt the rebels into climbing down, offering merely to grant pardons and declare the colonies once more at peace.[55] Germain even wanted to insert a clause stating that the colonists would need to declare formally their acceptance of Parliament's right to pass laws regulating all aspects of colonial life, before any negotiations on perceived grievances could begin.[56] Kathleen Burk dismissed the Howes' dual roles as ridiculous, believing that one of the tasks must inevitably have

[53] Lomas, ed., *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville,* Vol. II, pp. 33-36, Howe to Germain, 7 Jun. 1776.
[54] Ibid., pp. 34-35, Howe to Germain, 7 Jun. 1776.
[55] *Sixth Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts*, Part I (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1877), p. 400, King's general instructions for the conduct of the commissioners.
[56] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 71.

been neglected.[57] Characteristically, Howe failed to shed any light on this during his narrative. Acknowledging the fact that some people believed his role as commissioner had interfered with that of commander-in-chief, he went on to mangle the issue completely and assure the committee that it was 'next to an impossibility that my military could materially interfere with my civil duty'.[58] Whether he was attempting to be clever or had simply become confused is not clear, but his narrative did not betray many signs of cleverness elsewhere.

Gruber saw the peace commissioner role as the key to the staccato progress of the war under Howe, charting how the many pauses in activity coincided with renewed attempts to bring the rebels to the negotiating table. Even so, Gruber accepted that it was Richard Howe who was most optimistic about the peace commission, while William was doubtful that it could work before military success had been achieved.[59] Howe saw the Declaration of Independence as rather obvious evidence that the colonists no longer considered themselves to be under the authority of the King or of Parliament.[60] It seems unlikely, however, that he harboured any serious hopes that a decisive victory on the battlefield might open the doors to a negotiated peace; he certainly made no effort to secure one, despite his many declarations that this was what he sought.[61] Both of the Howe brothers appear to have had very little faith in the possibility of the peace commission bearing fruit, even if they could secure that all-important decisive victory. As quoted by Gruber, they painted a very gloomy picture for Germain from the very start.

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[57] K. Burke, *Old World New World: The Story of Britain and America* (London: Little, Brown, 2007), p. 158.
[58] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 32.
[59] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 71, p. 93 & p. 146.
[60] *Sixth Report of the Royal Commission*, p. 402, noted in the Journal of Henry Strachey, 22 Jun. to 30 Aug. 1776.
[61] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776; Ibid., ff. 214-216, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1776; Ibid., CO 5/95, ff. 14-15, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1777.

> As things now are, the whole seems to depend upon military and naval options. The ensuing campaign may possibly be decisive. Success (of which there are the greatest hopes) will naturally make room for negotiation and peace. But the infatuated expectations and perseverance of the present rulers of America appear so much beyond reason and nature, that no common powers of penetration can determine the effect of even the completest victory.[62]

The possibility that Howe was attempting to treat the rebels gently, so as not to make a peace settlement impossible, deserves consideration, but a policy as delicate as that would require great subtlety and it seems unfeasible that Howe would have made no reference to it in his letters to Germain. Hugh Bicheno raised the interesting idea that historical figures should only be viewed by their actions and not their letters, which were written with 'an eye on the historical record,'[63] and could therefore not be considered reliable. No doubt letters would not always reveal everything a general or politician was thinking or planning, but to pursue one policy while writing repeatedly of another would be foolhardy, especially when, as was the case during the Howe Inquiry, those letters would be the principal evidence on which to base a defence of one's conduct.

Howe's personal qualities

There is no doubt that Howe was a brave soldier. As shall be shown, evidence abounds of his courage under fire and his willingness to expose himself to the same risks he asked his men to face. This went a long way to making him popular with his soldiers. Marine lieutenant John Clarke claimed that Howe addressed his men prior to the Battle of Bunker Hill, saying: 'I shall not desire one of you to go a step farther

[62] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/177, Howe Brothers to Lord Germain, cited in Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 100.
[63] Bicheno, *Rebels and Redcoats*, p. xli.

than where I go myself at your head'.[64] If Howe did indeed say this, then it appears he was as good as his word, and he offered an even more striking example of his bravery the following year.[65] Reconnoitring a crossing of the Delaware near Trenton, on 8 December, Howe, Cornwallis and a small unit of light infantry and Hessian Jägers advanced through the town to discover that the Americans had erected batteries on the opposite bank of the river. Howe's Hessian aide, von Muenchhausen, wrote in his journal that the rebels opened up on the small group with 37 guns, inflicting 13 casualties. Despite this proof of the efficiency of the rebel guns, Howe, Cornwallis and three aides, including von Muenchhausen, remained under fire (having sent the troops out of harm's way) as they calmly surveyed the situation. Von Muenchhausen claimed to have stayed under fire in this manner for an hour, but it is possible it only seemed that long. One cannonball apparently sprayed dirt onto Howe's clothes and face, while another removed a leg from von Muenchhausen's horse, before they withdrew. Howe showed great generosity in giving his Hessian aide a 'superb English horse'[66] as a replacement. Von Muenchhausen (unsurprisingly, given the above incident) believed there was a great risk that Howe would be killed in the war and thought this would cost Britain the colonies.[67]

Lee's opinion of Howe is worth returning to in this regard. The former British army officer believed Howe to be 'brave and cool as Julius Caesar,'[68] an opinion that Howe himself might have disputed. Howe may have been able to present a picture of

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[64] J. Clarke, *An Impartial and Authentic Narrative of the Battle Fought on the 17th of June, 1775, Between His Britannic Majesty's Troops and the American Provincial Army, on Bunker's Hill* (London: J. Millan, 1775), p. 4; R. Frothingham, *The Centennial: Battle of Bunker Hill* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1875), p. 41.
[65] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, p. 11.
[66] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 6.
[67] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 42-43, Germain to Howe, 18 Oct. 1776; Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 32.
[68] Lee, *Anecdotes*, p. 424, Charles Lee to Benjamin Rush, 4 Jun. 1778.

coolness when under enemy artillery fire on a reconnoitring mission, but in the heat of battle it was a different matter entirely. Recollecting a moment after Bunker Hill, Clinton recalled that Howe had admitted he could not control his temper in battle and would sometimes snap at subordinates. Clinton believed he saw a further example of this temper when Howe, upset over the Hessian defeat at Trenton, had written his inflammatory letter to Lord Percy.[69]

This personal bravery in battle appears to have been allied with a generally pessimistic outlook. Howe's period in command of the British army was notable for its stop-start progress, and the letters he sent back to Germain were a puzzling mix. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Howe's correspondence followed a repeating pattern of positive news interspersed with pessimism. This does not appear to have been a case of a fluctuating mood (as Anderson claimed).[70] Howe never sounded optimistic in his correspondence, even when reporting very significant successes. He detailed the events, liberally handing out praise to all whom he deemed deserving of it, but his successes never led him to make a claim that he felt more optimistic about the progress of the war as a consequence. The evidence rather suggests that Howe was constantly pessimistic and that even the most striking successes (such as on Long Island or the capture of Fort Washington) were not enough to change that. Throughout 1776, Howe repeatedly made reference to the fact that a decisive battle was needed if the war was to be won, but he never actually said he believed it would be possible to gain one. What at first glance appear to be letters bursting with purpose and optimism were, on closer inspection, actually non-committal and loaded with qualifications. This was the case in his first letter to

[69] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 26, Memo of conversation with William Howe, 6 Jul. 1777.
[70] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, pp. 137-142.

Germain, on 25 April 1776, in which he admitted that a decisive victory at New York would be the key to terminating the war, but went on to claim that he would not be able to secure one unless he was established at New York early in the year.[71] His private letter of the next day again accepted the need for a decisive victory before offering reasons why he might not be able to win one.[72] In June he stated what appeared to be an obvious fact – that if the rebels offered battle he must not refuse it – and in July he claimed that peace would not be restored until the rebel army was defeated.[73] Despite these assertions, in August and October he would apparently spurn exactly the sort of battles he had been hoping for, at Long Island and White Plains.

It is tempting to dismiss as mere modesty Howe's claim (reported via his brother in September 1775)[74] that he felt inadequate to command the British army, yet it found an echo in the assessment of Lee, who claimed that Howe was 'confounded and stupefied'[75] by the task. Lee went on to describe a man who was simply trying to get through a war he had no idea how to win, following his orders, fighting his battles (with closed eyes) and resorting to his mistress and the bottle to blot out the details of a painful situation. It is an intriguing assessment and coming, as it does, in a letter filled with praise for Howe's personal qualities, it is not possible to dismiss it as simple bitterness from the man Howe had held prisoner.

Only twice, in fact, in all the surviving correspondence from Howe, was he bold enough to claim that he could win the war in one campaign. The first instance was in

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[71] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776.
[72] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 30, Howe to Germain, 26 Apr. 1776.
[73] Ibid., p. 34, Howe to Germain, 7 Jun. 1776; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 214-216, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1776.
[74] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, Lord Howe to Germain, 25 Sep. 1775, p. 9.
[75] Lee, *Anecdotes*, Charles Lee to Benjamin Rush, 4 Jun. 1778, p. 424.

his letter to his brother, Richard, while still at Boston in June 1775.[76] The second came when making his request for substantial reinforcements at the end of November 1776.[77] Considering that Howe made no other statement to that effect during more than two years in command, it seems that either each letter must have been the product of an uncharacteristic burst of optimism, or that there were other motives at work on each occasion. It is easy to see that his letter of 12 June 1775 was an attempt to ingratiate himself with Germain, but an assertion that a war can be ended in one campaign is not one to be made lightly and Howe included no qualifications; the victory was not dependent on the activities of the rebels, the timely arrival of reinforcements or any other factors that found their way into later letters.[78] Unlike the first example, Howe's second declaration that he could win the war in one campaign was attached to a very large proviso indeed – the arrival of 15,000 reinforcements.[79] There are two ways to consider Howe's request. Either he genuinely believed he could finish the job with an army of 35,000 men, or he felt he had no hope of accomplishing the feat with anything less. A conspiracy theorist might be able to look at his request as deliberately destructive, a demand that he knew had little hope of being complied with and which would, therefore, absolve him of responsibility for failure to end the war, but Howe did not appear to lose confidence in his position until he had received Germain's reply, several months later.[80] There is no evidence that he was coldly calculating a way out of what he viewed as an untenable position any earlier that that.

[76] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775.
[77] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[78] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775.
[79] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[80] Ibid., CO 5/94, ff. 1-6, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777. Received 9 March according to *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 381.

It is not difficult to see the importance of the fact that the first letter was written before the Battle of Bunker Hill, and before a long winter spent in Boston. The impact of Bunker Hill on Howe has long been a part of American Revolution lore and it is part of his legend that the experience made him timid in the face of American fortifications. Although it is tempting to challenge any long-accepted version of events, the impact of Bunker Hill cannot be dismissed. While it is true that Howe showed a willingness to attack fortified positions (on the Dorchester Heights and, later, at Fort Washington) even after the horror of his assault on Breed's Hill, it could not fail to have made some impact on him. Howe left the battlefield having watched his force suffer heavy casualties and it seems possible that every member of his staff was killed or wounded.[81] If it could be shown that Howe was an unfeeling, unemotional man, then perhaps a case could be made that he would have been able to shrug this off, but his correspondence does not reveal such a man. The evident distress conveyed in his account of the Battle of Bunker Hill to Edward Harvey ('when I look at the consequences of it… I do it with horror')[82] is evidence of a more sensitive personality.

Howe offered an earlier example of this during the French and Indian War. In 1758, the young Howe was apparently devastated by the death of his eldest brother, George Augustus, at Ticonderoga. Writing to his brother, Richard, he admitted that the news had been more than he could bear, suggesting that he had broken down. Howe went on to urge his brother to exercise caution in his own conduct so that the family would not be made to suffer again.[83] Gruber viewed this as evidence of a lack

[81] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, pp. 11-12.
[82] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of King George III, Vol. III*, p. 223, Howe to Adjutant-General (Edward Harvey), 22 & 24 Jun. 1775.
[83] WCL, Howe Papers, William Howe to Lord Richard Howe, 23 Nov. 1758.

of self-confidence in Howe, but that seems to be a harsh judgement.[84] This rather touching and completely unguarded letter suggests an emotional side to Howe that is seldom mentioned. His words were certainly heartfelt, and this was echoed in a letter to the Earl of Buckinghamshire almost 18 years later. Howe showed sensitivity in referring to the 'infinite pain'[85] the Earl and his wife must have suffered on the deaths of two infant boys in quick succession, but then plunged into a recounting of military events in North America. There was an awkwardness to this letter, a sense that Howe was naturally sympathetic but felt constrained in his ability to display it. The rawness of his letter 18 years previously, written by a younger man in circumstances of terrible personal loss, was absent, but the sensitivity was still there.

As well as being a traumatic experience, Bunker Hill may also have made an impact on Howe's beliefs about the possibility of winning the war quickly. Coming, as it did, just five days after his letter to Lord Howe, claiming that he could end the war with an army of 19,000, it is reasonable to suggest that there must have been at least some reassessment of his opinion. Howe was given ample time to brood upon the consequences of such a costly victory as the siege of Boston drew out into the following year. It was nine months before Howe extricated his army from Boston, and the time spent there would not have been pleasant.[86] Apart from the ignominy of being besieged by the rebel army, there were shortages of fresh provisions and firewood.[87] Clinton's memos of conversations with Howe show the commander-in-chief to have been in a dour mood throughout the months in Boston, occasionally suggesting diversionary raids but never putting them into operation. He also

[84] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 57.
[85] *Report on the Manuscripts of the Marquess of Lothian, Preserved at Blickling Hall, Norfolk* (London: Mackie & Co., 1905), p. 296, General Howe to the Earl of Buckinghamshire, 8 Jul. 1776.
[86] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 87-92, Howe to Dartmouth, 21 Mar. 1776.
[87] Stevens, ed., *Orderly Book*, p. 50, 22 Jul. 1775.

expressed fears regarding potential rebel activity (fearing that they might burn the British barracks on Bunker Hill, for instance) and worried over problems real or perceived.[88] His previously mentioned concerns over driving the rebels from a position at Phip's Farm were remarkable, because the rebels had no such position at the time he expressed his concerns to Clinton; Howe was merely speculating, rather gloomily, on what might happen *if* the rebels built works there.[89] The impression is unavoidable – that Howe was preoccupied with potential setbacks. Anticipating difficulties is part of the job of a commander-in-chief, but it does appear that Howe was at times dominated by his pessimism and failed to take action to forestall problems that he had foreseen. The rebel move to occupy the Dorchester Heights in March of the following year, for instance, could easily have been prevented by timely action on his part. He had mentioned it as a desirable objective as early as 12 June 1775, but had done nothing to secure it.[90]

Howe's mood at this time would seem to be encapsulated by his statement that the British were 'liable to attack from the whole world'.[91] His pessimism would prove to be prophetic, but it would be more than two years before other nations entered the war on the side of the Americans. During the same conversation, Howe confided in Clinton that he had learned of the opinion of the Secretary at War regarding the rebellion. According to Clinton, Howe revealed this in confidence, never having told anyone else. Clinton did not elaborate on what (according to Howe) Viscount Barrington's thoughts were, but it is accepted that he advocated a seaborne strategy, believing an effective blockade would force the rebels to come to a negotiated

[88] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 19, Memo of conversation with General Howe, 3 Dec. 1775.
[89] Ibid., Vol. XII, f. 40, Memo of conversation with William Howe, 1775.
[90] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, f. 3, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775.
[91] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 19, Memo of conversation with General Howe, 3 Dec. 1775.

settlement and doubting the possibility of achieving victory through land operations. (Responding to Lord North's news that Barrington doubted enough reinforcements could be found to amass a suitable army for the American war, the King had pointed out that his pessimism had much to do with his preference for a purely naval strategy).[92] If Howe had serious doubts about the possibility of winning a land-based war, he would not have been encouraged by the knowledge that other prominent men shared those doubts.

A bloody battle followed by a nine-month siege comprised a dispiriting introduction to the war for Howe. The confinement in Boston must have been frustrating as he intended to leave and establish a base at New York in order to make an early start to the 1776 campaign, only to be frustrated by a shortage of shipping.[93] The siege was frequently punctuated by the formulation of schemes to test the rebel army, none of which was ever put into operation. Howe himself, in a rare display of energy during this period, suggested a detailed plan to burn rebel barracks and Admiral Howe suggested an expedition to take Rhode Island.[94]

Even after escaping from the confinement at Boston, Howe remained a cautious commander, as evidenced by the frequent lengthy pauses between actions. Following the Battle of Long Island, on 27 August 1776, Howe waited 19 days before landing on Manhattan, then almost a full month before his next move, to Throg's Neck. The Battle of White Plains came 16 days later and Fort Washington was not taken until 19 days after that. Logistical reasons offered a partial excuse for this staccato progress (most major movements made by the British involved combined operations that

[92] Fortescue, ed., *Correspondence of King George III*, pp. 250-251, George III to Lord North, 26 Aug. 1775.
[93] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 33-36, Howe to Dartmouth, 16 Jan. 1776.
[94] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 19, Memo of conversation with General Howe, 3 Dec. 1775.

would have required a great deal of planning), but not a complete one. Lee's assessment that Howe simply had no idea how to wage his war is a persuasive one, but Howe's underlying caution must also be considered. Despite his great personal bravery in battle, Howe was concerned that he should not pay too great a price for his victories.[95] This is an admirable trait and would have earned him the respect of his men, but Howe may have taken it too far. His famous decision to halt the assault of his grenadiers on the American lines at Brooklyn is a key point here. Howe admitted freely (in one of his customarily unguarded comments in correspondence with Germain) that he believed his men would have taken the redoubt, but only at the risk of high casualties.[96] In his narrative, Howe dealt with this issue in some depth, insisting that he may have been labelled criminally negligent had he permitted the attack to continue. It was his duty, he argued, not to throw the lives of his men away carelessly, especially where the objective was not important enough to justify the cost.[97]

The draft of Howe's narrative casts a little new light on this episode. Instead of saying that he would have been condemned as inconsiderate or even criminal, he originally intended to offer the much stronger phrase: 'I should have been deemed a madman had I encouraged the attack in question'.[98] Howe's caution was even more forcefully evident in a heavily re-worked sentence from his narrative regarding the failure to launch a full-scale assault at White Plains. No doubt aware that his words would be closely analysed, he repeatedly crossed out and re-wrote this sentence. Initially, he seems to have intended to start with, 'I am free to own I would never

[95] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 19.
[96] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.
[97] Ibid., p. 5.
[98] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 11.

hazard the assault of lines'.[99] Perhaps quickly realising that this was a dangerous thing for a general to admit, the sentence was partially struck through and Howe proceeded to write, 'I am free to own if I could remove an enemy from a very advantageous situation without the hazard of an attack I should certainly embrace it.' This was still too strong a wording, and Howe revised it yet again to:

> I am free to own if I could remove an enemy from a very advantageous situation without the hazard of an attack where the object to be carried was not adequate to the cost of men to be expected from an assault upon strong lines, I should certainly embrace it in the hopes of meeting him upon more equal terms.[100]

Even this cumbersome wording, now loaded with extenuating phrases, was eventually considered unfit for service. Perhaps the implication of welcoming an opportunity to avoid battle also caused Howe to re-think, because 'embrace it' was replaced by 'adopt that cautionary conduct,'[101] and the mention of strong lines was removed altogether, possibly because it carried the troublesome implication that he might never be willing to attack a well-positioned enemy.

It is impossible to argue with Howe's assertion that it would have been reckless to risk casualties for an objective that would not justify the losses. The key factor here, of course, was Howe's judgement of exactly what would constitute an important enough objective. Howe's decision at Long Island will be considered in detail in the following chapter, but it is clear that many of his contemporaries, including his own second-in-command, Clinton, believed the objective was important enough to justify the risk.[102] Howe's understanding that any casualties suffered on campaign would be hard to replace (he described his army as 'the stock upon which the national force in

[99] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 21.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 7.
[102] Willcox, ed., *The American Rebellion*, pp. 43-44.

America must in future be grafted')[103] is, again, a mark in his favour, but it begs the question of exactly where he thought Germain was going to find the 15 or 20,000 reinforcements he requested at the end of 1776.[104]

Howe's cautionary conduct appears to have prevented him from acting with the vigour Germain would have liked to see and he also proved himself unwilling to wage the kind of war Germain envisaged. Howe's distaste for punitive warfare was detailed in Chapter 1, in so far as it clashed with Clinton's views on the prosecution of the war, but this is also another area in which the draft of Howe's narrative is illuminating.[105] In his clumsy speech, Howe acknowledged the criticism levelled at him for attempting to wage a campaign of conciliation rather than devastation and spoke of his intention not to 'irritate them [the colonists] by a contrary mode of proceeding'.[106] The draft shows that he initially intended to go further, by adding 'which I am sorry to say seems now to be intended'.[107] The final narrative proceeded with, 'Had it been afterwards judged good policy to turn the plan of war into an indiscriminate devastation of that country, and had I been thought the proper instrument for executing such a plan, ministers, I presume, would have openly stood forth, and sent clear, explicit orders.' Once more, the draft shows that Howe had originally planned a much more revealing phrase, with 'had I been thought the proper instrument for executing such a plan' originally reading 'had I been capable of executing that sanguinary plan…'. This not only conveyed more fully Howe's personal distaste for such a method of warfare, it also suggested that there was a point at which he might not have been willing to obey orders. The implication is clear that,

[103] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 228-230, Howe to Germain, 6 Aug. 1776.
[104] Ibid., ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[105] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 32, Memo of conversation with Sir W. H. relative to the Southern Expedition, Dec. 1775.
[106] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 9.
[107] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 29.

had he indeed received explicit orders to devastate the country, he would have had difficulty following them.

The burning of Falmouth highlighted Howe's repugnance of such a mode of warfare.[108] Interestingly, Germain himself reacted with surprise to news of the raid (there was some confusion over who had ordered it, as it took place around the time of Howe taking over as commander-in-chief and Germain as American Secretary). Brown credited Germain with inquiring into the incident, but it seems unlikely that Germain could have had any genuine objections to a mode of warfare that he went on to press upon Howe repeatedly.[109] Howe was certainly eager to be absolved of any responsibility; when Germain asked him for a report on the details of the raid, Howe was blunt in laying responsibility at Gage's door.[110]

The Falmouth incident gave Howe ample justification in avoiding Germain's encouragements to raid the New England coast. The reputation of the naval officer commanding the raid, Lieutenant Henry Mowat, appears to have suffered as a consequence, and Howe originally intended to make reference to this in his narrative, referring to 'animadversions upon the conduct of a sea officer for burning a town on the coast'.[111] Howe amended this passage to instead refer to 'a circumstance not now necessary to dwell upon'.[112] If Howe thought it might be unwise to resurrect a matter over which suspicion had initially fallen on him, then it was a rare example of astuteness on his part. For most of his time in command in America, and during the

[108] Maine Historical Society, Dispatch from Capt. Henry Mowat to Vice Admiral Graves about the Destruction of Falmouth (Portland), 19 Oct. 1775.
[109] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 42-43, Germain to Howe, 18 Oct. 1776; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 104-105, Germain to Howe, 3 Mar. 1777; Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 93-94, Germain to Howe, 18 Feb. 1778.
[110] Brown, *American Secretary*, p. 76; *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 315, Howe to Germain, 7 May 1776.
[111] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 29.
[112] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 9.

fractious years afterwards, he displayed naivety and even clumsiness in his dealings with inferiors and superiors alike. The result was that he was extremely vulnerable by the time he returned to England. Criticism of his conduct in America was most vociferous in a series of pamphlets, but there also appears to have been a whispering campaign against him and Howe certainly believed that Germain was making his dissatisfaction clear in private, if by no other method than neglecting to defend him.[113]

Howe appears to have had no inkling that statements he made in letters to Germain might be used against him if events went badly (alternatively, he may have had no doubts that he would be successful in America and that no defence of his actions would ever need to be made). When careful consideration of what he said would have been prudent, he often made rash declarations, betraying what might be called a lack of political awareness. He certainly provided plenty of ammunition for anyone who wanted to criticise his conduct. Examples of this are plentiful in his communications with Germain. His repeated reassurances that he saw a decisive battle as the surest route to victory in the war laid him open to criticism for not securing one, and even for turning down two apparent chances for just such a battle, on Long Island and at White Plains. In June and October 1775, and in January, April, June, July and November 1776, Howe touched on the subject of the desirability of bringing Washington's army to battle and defeating it.[114] He does not appear to have ever fully realised the dangers inherent in this, even when heavily qualifying his

[113] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, p. 111. Howe claimed that even had the attacks on his character not been encouraged by ministers, they had not been contradicted by them.
[114] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 311-316, Howe to Dartmouth, 9 Oct. 1775; *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 291-294, Howe to Dartmouth, 16 Jan. 1776; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776; Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 30, Howe to Germain, 26 Apr. 1776; Ibid., p. 34, Howe to Germain, 7 Jun. 1776; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 214-216, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1776; Ibid., ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.

statements about the need to destroy the main rebel army. It is remarkable (given that Howe clearly recognised the many problems involved in attempting to secure a decisive victory) that he could keep referring to his desire for a major battle in his correspondence. It would be compelling evidence in any case against him should the war go badly.

More specific examples of this lack of awareness in his communications include his rash statement, in June of 1776, to have been amazed at the achievements of Germain since taking office.[115] Such lavish praise for the man presenting him with his army would obviously negate any possibility of defending himself on the grounds of having had insufficient force for the 1776 campaign. It is not so much that Howe ought to have been constantly looking to his own defence in case he did not win the war, but given his constant references to a decisive battle, freely acknowledging the fact that he had an army fit for purpose was dangerous. He clearly entertained doubts (liberally detailed in his letters to Germain) about the possibility of forcing a decisive battle, yet he made it clear he understood how important it was and that he had an army substantial enough to achieve it. Political enemies would have been able to turn that against him had they chosen to.

Howe demonstrated that he had no forebodings about this after the Battle of Long Island. In his report, he mentioned halting the impetuous attack of the grenadiers and 33rd Regiment on the American lines at Brooklyn, adding 'Had they been permitted to go on, it is my opinion they would have carried the redoubt'.[116] This was certainly a candid admission, but it was not a wise one, given that, at the time of writing, Howe knew that the bulk of the rebel force on Long Island had been able to

[115] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 212-213, Howe to Germain, 8 Jun. 1776.
[116] Ibid., ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.

evacuate on the night of 29 August. A chance for a more comprehensive victory had been allowed to slip away and admitting that his men would probably have successfully stormed the redoubt meant that he would have to bear full responsibility for failing to capture a major part of Washington's army. During the parliamentary inquiry, Howe expressed indignation at this phrase being turned against him, insisting that he had only meant to convey his high opinion of the soldiers in question. This is questionable, given Howe's witnessing of the same grenadiers falling into disarray on Breed's Hill. The sight of another undisciplined assault from them was more likely to have filled him with dread rather than admiration for their fighting zeal. Howe's defence displayed once more his lack of facility with words, outlining the situation on Long Island in such confusing terms that even careful study of contemporary maps cannot clarify what he meant beyond doubt.[117]

Following the fall of Fort Washington and Fort Lee, as Cornwallis led a vigorous pursuit of what little remained of Washington's army, Howe allowed the British force to stop at Brunswick rather than ordering it to continue and, potentially, capture or completely disperse the rebels. Bearing in mind Howe had repeatedly acknowledged the importance of destroying Washington's army (and almost as frequently lamented the fact that he would have great difficulty in achieving it), his letter to Germain on this matter was another example of Howe's lack of astuteness. He admitted that his aims had extended only as far as gaining possession of East Jersey, and that he had therefore ordered Cornwallis to proceed no further than Brunswick (which he reached on 1 December). Howe was admitting that territorial gain was now the only goal he had in mind. Worse than this, it took him five days to realise that a continued pursuit of the rebels might be worthwhile. The British and

[117] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 4.

Hessians have often been labelled slow-moving and cumbersome (von Muenchhausen commented on Howe's slowness, while the amount of baggage carried by a regiment was a genuine impediment to speed),[118] but in this case Howe's letter also revealed that Cornwallis's men had dumped their baggage to allow them to pursue the Americans more readily. The impression created was one of Howe again calling his men back when the destruction of the rebel army seemed possible.[119]

Perhaps the most puzzling example of this trait came in the same letter, with Howe's observation to Germain that the chain of posts he had set up in New Jersey was 'rather too extensive', but adding 'I conclude the troops will be in perfect security'. If Howe had genuinely had a foreboding that his string of outposts was too thinly stretched, he should have altered their arrangement. If he genuinely believed they would be in perfect security, he had no need to mention his concerns. Howe could be considered unlucky in the sequence of events that followed (the Hessians garrisoning Trenton, on the extreme left of the chain of posts, allowed themselves to be surprised, while the Americans displayed a fighting spirit that had previously been lacking), but the fall of Trenton, boosting rebel morale and puncturing the air of invincibility that had been gradually building around the British and Hessian forces, was a serious blow. Again, Howe's defence of this episode was clumsy. In his narrative he concentrated mainly on the decision to place Hessian regiments at Trenton, ignoring the fact that it was the isolation of the post and the size of the garrison, rather than its composition, that had been its essential weakness (the nearest support had been based five miles away). Rhetorically, he asked the House where he

[118] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 6, 7 Dec. 1776; WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 23, General Orders for 23 Sep. 1776
[119] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 16-18, Howe to Germain, 20 Dec. 1776.

could have used the Hessians better, even though this was not the pertinent question.[120]

The inquiry itself is evidence of Howe's limitations in the political arena. His attempts to goad Germain into making a rash comment that might justify the Howes' demands for an inquiry into their conduct were crude. On a motion (raised on 4 December 1778) to condemn an apparent switch to a more punitive form of warfare, following the entry of France into the war, Howe took the opportunity to push for his inquiry, asserting that the war would never go well while Germain was running it.[121] It was an unsophisticated, unsubtle goading, and one that Germain refused to rise to, replying only that he was surprised at such an unexpected attack and had believed that nothing but the motion itself would be discussed that day. Germain, who was a highly capable speaker, professed his unpreparedness to defend himself, but proceeded to deliver a concise and highly effective rebuttal of Howe. It was so effective, in fact, that Howe should have realised that Germain's defence was solid, yet he persisted with his demands for an inquiry. By April 1779 Cornwallis was writing in exasperation that Howe was determined to have his inquiry, even though he had advised him against it.

> Sir William Howe, in spite of all that can be said to him, will have a parliamentary inquiry into his conduct. He is himself prosecutor and defendant… People of all parties seem to think that it is an ill judged business, and can answer no purpose for Sir William.[122]

Cornwallis, whose wife had recently died, was distressed that Howe intended calling him as a witness. The fact that Howe could call, as his star witness, a man who did not wish to be there and who did not believe the inquiry could serve any useful

[120] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 7-8.
[121] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 111-114.
[122] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. LV, f. 42, Cornwallis to Clinton, 4 Apr. 1779.

purpose, shows a clear lack of perception on the part of Howe. The narrative with which he opened the inquiry was confused, rambling and failed to answer any of the questions surrounding his conduct. Perhaps even worse than this, when he started to put questions to Cornwallis it became clear that there had been no preparation whatsoever between the two. Cornwallis opened by ignoring Howe's first question and insisting that he would not answer any questions that were a matter of opinion. When Howe arrived at the critical questions regarding his failure to storm the lines at Brooklyn, Cornwallis refused to be drawn into giving an opinion. Howe's first witness would not testify that Howe had been right to halt the assault on the lines. He went on to refuse to comment on the importance of taking New York (even making the pointed observation that his opinion was not important because the inquiry had not been set up to examine *his* conduct). He declined to answer a question on the decision to focus on Pennsylvania for the 1777 campaign, refused to give details of private conversations with Howe and refused to answer a question on how strongly Howe had pushed for a decisive battle at the Brandywine.[123]

Cornwallis's reticence worked in Howe's favour when he was cross-examined by supporters of the ministry (for instance, he refused to say whether the American lines at Brooklyn had been manned, or whether Clinton would have been able to get behind them). The impression created was very different when he refused to answer many of Howe's questions. At times he appeared to be a hostile witness, strongly suggesting that Howe had not conferred with him in any detail on the nature of his questioning. Howe had demanded the inquiry and should have been aware that there was a possibility that it could go badly for him. His military career was at stake, and

[123] *Parliamentary Register; or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the House of Commons during the Fifth Session of the Fourteenth Parliament of Great Britain*, Vol. XII (London: Wilson and Co. 1802), pp. 1-8.

also his personal reputation. In spite of this, his defence was laboured, confusing and appeared to have been badly organised. To have been able to stand in front of a committee comprising the entire House of Commons with such inadequate defences suggests that Howe had either woefully misjudged the strength of his case or that he felt sure no effective attack would be made on him. His principal opponent would be Germain, who had made it clear during debates on the necessity of an inquiry that he did not want one. He had refused to rise to Howe's goading and, during the long discussions over whether witnesses should be heard following Howe's narrative, he had declared he saw no point in the inquiry going on as he held the general in high regard. (On 3 May 1779, Germain stated that the House appeared satisfied with Howe's conduct, and that he cheerfully acquiesced in that opinion.)[124] Howe may also have drawn comfort from the fact that the opposition had its sights set on Germain and would thus speak in his (Howe's) favour. It remains the case that an effective cross-examination of Howe would have easily uncovered the many flaws in his narrative.[125]

One final aspect of Howe's character deserves investigation. An alleged tendency towards laziness and pleasure-seeking has been cited, with some claiming that it detracted from his ability to carry out his duties effectively.[126] His fondness for female company (he kept a mistress throughout the war, although this was not unusual at the time) has attracted particular comment, and in one instance gave rise to one of the enduring myths of the war. 'Mrs Murray's Strategy' was one explanation offered for Howe's slowness in moving across Manhattan after landing at Kip's Bay.

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[124] W. Cobbet, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, Vol. XX (7 Dec. 1778 to 10 Feb. 1780) (London: T. C. Hansard, 1814), p. 744.
[125] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII, pp. 8-16.
[126] Partridge, *Sir Billy Howe*, pp. 4-5 & p. 254; Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 190; Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, pp. 72-73; Wheatley, ed., *Memoirs of Sir Nathaniel William Wraxall*, Vol. I, p. 357.

The failure to seal off the city of New York allowed thousands of rebels soldiers to escape and the delay was ascribed to the quick-thinking of a local widow, Mrs Murray, famed for her hospitality. The legend asserted that she invited Howe and his staff to take refreshments with her and so entertained the general that he completely forgot his military duties. The tale appears entirely unfounded, as Howe had no intention of moving quickly across Manhattan (the second wave of troops landed hours after the first and Clinton had been ordered only to secure the high ground at Inclenberg or Murray Hill with the first wave).[127] As Henry Belcher perceptively pointed out, when it came to assessing Howe's conduct, 'fairy tales hang round his adventures'.[128]

There is further evidence that Howe was not quite so susceptible to womanly wiles as sometimes claimed. Having observed a series of balls staged at Rhode Island, Lord Howe's personal secretary, Henry Strachey, commented in a letter to his wife that 'I have not seen even the smallest symptom [in William Howe] of that sort of gallantry which your scandalous news papers attribute to him'.[129] Strachey also noted that Howe was a devoted correspondent with his wife, putting his fellow officers to shame. Howe would take any opportunity to write a few lines, saving the many scraps of paper until a packet became available and then sending them off together. These letters could sometimes reach 16 pages.[130]

Howe did enjoy the comforts available to an eighteenth-century commander-in-chief, but they do not appear to have been excessive. It was not unusual for officers on prolonged duty away from home to keep a mistress, while a liking for drinking and gambling at cards were also not uncommon. It does, however, seem that the pursuit of

[127] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 46-47.
[128] Belcher, *First American Civil War*, p. 164.
[129] WCL, Strachey Papers, Strachey to Mrs Strachey, 8 Mar. 1778; f. 49.
[130] Ibid., Strachey to Mrs Strachey, 2 Dec. 1776 and 20 May 1777.

happiness did sometimes take precedence over business. When rebels threatened Fort Independence on Manhattan, in early 1777, Howe intended to visit the garrison at Fort Knyphausen (originally Fort Washington and renamed after its capture in honour of the Hessian general) to deliver orders. Preferring, however, to stay at New York, where a party was planned to celebrate the Queen's birthday, Howe sent his Hessian aide instead. Von Muenchhausen reported on the brief artillery bombardment that subsequently drove the rebels from their position and how he had then returned to New York in time for fireworks and a ball. 'A crazy life it is,'[131] was his succinct comment on the affair.

Von Muenchhausen also had first-hand experience of Howe's personal ship, the converted East Indiaman *Britannia*. Described as big enough for a crew of 400, it was instead manned by just 30 and two decks had been converted into halls, complete with state rooms. With white lacquered walls, gold skirting boards, mirrors and copper engravings built into the walls and oversized portholes offering spectacular views, the halls were packed with luxurious furniture and the upper hall had been extended, with a gallery leading out onto the quarterdeck so that guests could promenade in the open air. Von Muenchhausen was, in fact, almost killed on the *Britannia*, when it was struck by lightning during the passage to Chesapeake Bay. Only the force of the main mast collapsing, which forced the prow of the ship underwater, extinguished the flames and saved the ship and her passengers (Howe himself was travelling with his brother on the *Eagle*).[132]

[131] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, 18 Jan. 1777, p. 9.
[132] Ibid., p. 21.

Conclusion

Howe is difficult to assess without the benefit of a generous collection of personal papers, but elements of his character can be deduced from careful examination of his personal interactions and correspondence. The picture that emerges is of a sensitive, emotional man, generally pessimistic in his outlook. Possessed of great personal bravery in battle, he was concerned for the welfare of his men and determined not to risk them needlessly. This cautious attitude was sometimes taken to the extreme and he did not seem to possess the vision to recognise when the few opportunities to win the war might have fleetingly presented themselves. He does not appear to have been intellectually gifted, but he had a solid grounding in military practices. As a commander he was stolid rather than dashing, despite his experiences with light infantry. His approach, in battle and in personal matters, was simple and lacking in subtlety.

Coupled with what has already been shown of Howe's great patience when dealing with the difficult character of his second-in-command, it is clear that Howe was a considerate commander and it is easy to see why he would have been popular with his men; he brought them an almost unbroken sequence of victories without (with the notable exception of Bunker Hill) suffering unduly heavy casualties. It is also clear that this was not the general to implement the coercive policy favoured by Germain. Howe had a great personal repugnance for punitive warfare, treated the rebels with respect and refused to widen the scope of the war into one of devastation. He was not the dull, coarse man some have described, but nor was he gifted enough to find a way to win a difficult war.

V

Howe's Decisions

Historians have grappled with Howe's enigmatic period in command of the British army for over two centuries.[1] Although almost every decision made by the general has been investigated at one time or another, several elements have emerged as the most contentious and controversial. Most contentious of all were his decision to halt the British assault at the Brooklyn Heights and his failure to launch a full-scale attack at White Plains, both in 1776. In addition, the overall strategy that he adopted, especially in 1777, has been scrutinised. The problem historians have faced is that Howe appears to have been inconsistent in his command, and a theory that explains his conduct at every point has proved elusive. This problem presents itself most clearly in the assault of Fort Washington, exactly the sort of costly attack on a prepared defensive position that Howe had previously shown himself unwilling to make. In this chapter the various influencing factors already discussed will be brought together and Howe's decision-making will be examined in detail.

I: The Battle of Long Island

The strategic importance of New York was recognised by British and American military commanders alike. Both saw the theoretical possibility of the rebellious colonies being divided by British control of the Hudson River. Washington saw it as the obvious destination for Howe's army after he evacuated Boston and was

[1] Early works on the war appeared towards the end of the eighteenth century, including Stedman's, *History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War* (1794).

determined to stop the British from possessing it.[2] The British had earmarked it as the keystone for their entire strategy in 1776, with Howe aiming to establish a base in the city and then send forces north, to meet with an army penetrating southwards into New York State from Canada.[3] Whether it would actually have proved possible to cut the New England colonies off from the middle and southern colonies is debateable (the Hudson is 315 miles long), but it was at least a plausible strategy.[4]

New York was a poor defensive position for the American forces, especially considering the overwhelming strength of the Royal Navy. Admiral Lord Howe had a fleet of over 400 ships at his disposal, with 30 ships of the line (major warships mounting more than 60 guns).[5] The Americans could mount no resistance at all to this fleet (privateers disrupting the shipping of British supplies was the only naval effort made at the time). Indeed, the Continental Navy did not get its first ship of the line until near the end of the war.[6] In 1776, New York City occupied the bottom tip of Manhattan (*Figure 1*). The North or Hudson River divided Manhattan from New Jersey to the west, while the East River separated it from Long Island to the south and east. At the northern tip of Manhattan, two bridges connected it with Westchester County. Manhattan, vulnerable to being cut off by an amphibious force moving up either the Hudson or East Rivers, was a difficult enough position to hold. The situation was made even worse by the fact that the city was overlooked by high ground (the Columbia Heights, commonly referred to as the Brooklyn Heights)

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[2] J. Rhodehamel, ed., *Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1987), pp. 200-205, Washington to Joseph Reed, 14 Jan. 1776; Ibid., pp. 218-223, Washington to John Augustine Washington, 31 Mar. 1776.
[3] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 200-206, Dartmouth to Gage, 2 Aug. 1775; SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, f. 6, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775.
[4] Encyclopaedia Britannica, online version, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/274713/Hudson-River, accessed 18 Sep. 2013.
[5] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, p. 101.
[6] J. R. Dull, 'Diplomacy of the Revolution, to 1783', in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, ed. J. P. Greene and J. R. Pole (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), p. 328.

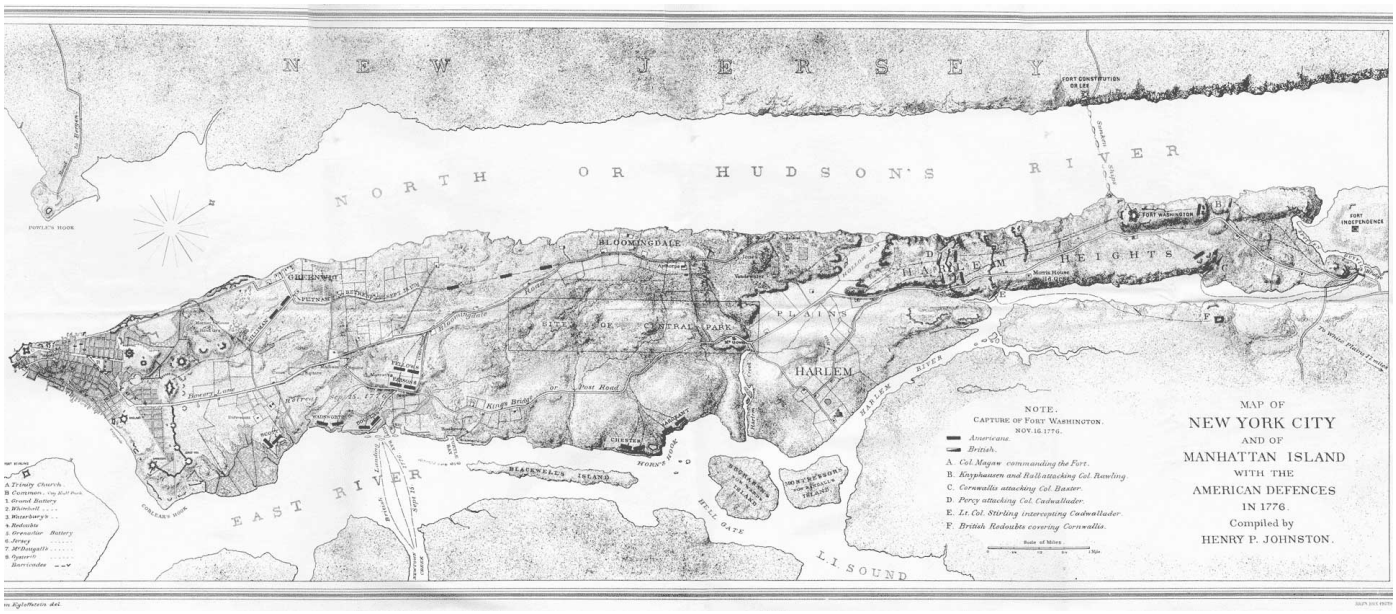

Figure 1: *Map of New York City and of Manhattan Island*, in Johnston, *The Campaign of 1776*.

on Long Island, making it also necessary to hold this land if New York City was to remain tenable (in a similar situation, the Americans had exploited Boston's vulnerability by occupying the Dorchester Heights the previous year and forcing Howe to evacuate).[7] In turn, the works on the Brooklyn Heights needed to be protected against a possible landward assault, so a chain of fortifications, linked by entrenchments, was established across the neck of the Brooklyn Peninsula.[8]

Henry Clinton believed New York was impossible to hold and Washington himself had doubts, but recognised the importance of the city to the British.[9] Charles Lee was given the task of surveying the city and its surroundings and coming up with a plan for its defence, but he also expressed misgivings when he reported to Washington in March 1776. Noting that New York was surrounded by navigable waters, he acknowledged the difficulty in preventing enemy ships from going wherever they wanted. Overall, he felt that it would be difficult to make the city

[7] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 87-92, Howe to Dartmouth, 21 Mar. 1776.
[8] H. P. Johnston, *The Campaign of 1776 Around New York and Brooklyn* (New Jersey: Scholar's Bookshelf, 2005), pp. 67-68.
[9] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XIII, f. 38a, Remarks on New York, 8 Feb. 1776; Rhodehamel, ed., *Writings*, pp. 218-223, Washington to John Augustine Washington, 31 Mar. 1776.

genuinely tenable, but believed the British could be made to pay a steep price in casualties for shifting the Americans from it. Lee described a strategy of fortifying Manhattan along its entire length, making the British fight every step of the way to gain control.[10] (This, of course, would depend on Howe obligingly hurling his men at those defences.) Washington shared Lee's belief that exacting a heavy price on the British was the key to success. In fact, he doubted his men would be able to follow any other strategy, believing them to be incapable of fighting in the open field.[11] In a situation where there was a real danger of being outmanoeuvred by British naval forces, therefore, Washington felt constrained to divide his army and place his men in static positions. They would be terribly vulnerable to being picked off systematically by the British, if Howe chose to follow such a course of action.

Clinton advised against attacking the Americans in their prepared defences, advocating the landing of forces either on Manhattan or, preferably, in Westchester County, where they could dominate the two bridges leading off Manhattan. The latter option would effectively trap the main rebel army and, considering the dominance of the Royal Navy, it is difficult to see how Washington could have extricated himself.[12] Although the Americans had a major fortification, Fort Washington, at the northern end of Manhattan, its inability to prevent British shipping from passing had already been demonstrated when two ships (the *Phoenix* and the *Rose*) had sailed up the Hudson on 12 July without suffering serious damage. However, rather than viewing this as a green light for operations by a more substantial naval force, Howe saw this merely as a means of interrupting the flow of supplies onto Manhattan.[13] The British

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[10] P. K. Walker, ed., *Engineers of Independence: A Documentary History of the Army Engineers in the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (Washington D. C.: U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1981), pp. 114-116.
[11] Rhodehamel, ed., *Writings*, pp. 207-208, Washington to Joseph Reed, 1 Feb. 1776
[12] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XIII, f. 38a, Remarks on New York, 8 Feb. 1776.
[13] (TNA), PRO, 5/93, ff. 217-218, Howe to Germain, 8 Jul. 1776.

commander had already decided on a more direct route, landing on Long Island and attacking the rebel positions there.[14]

By July, the Americans had established yet another line of defences on Long Island, about two miles in front of the chain of redoubts that, in turn, protected the fortifications guarding the East River. This new line of positions, along the Gowanus Heights (a steep, heavily wooded slope formed by the terminal moraine of the glacier that had advanced across Long Island thousands of years previously)[15] was considered formidable by the British and Washington eventually modified his plan to make it the mainstay of his defences. His best troops would be placed there, with the intention of stopping the British or at least inflicting heavy casualties on them.[16]

Washington's position was rendered more difficult by his uncertainty over where the British would land first. There was a danger that they might land on Long Island and Manhattan simultaneously, so the Americans were forced to divide their army. Out of a total force numbering around 28,000 (with only about 20,000 fit for duty) Washington had initially placed only eight regiments (with a paper strength of around 3,500) on Long Island.[17] The American commander was particularly conscious of the fact that his men on Long Island could do nothing more than wait in their lines, surrendering the vast majority of the island, including its abundant supplies, to the British.[18] Howe landed a force on Long Island on 22 August, quickly reinforcing them up to a total of around 15,000. When the Hessians followed a few

[14] (TNA), PRO, 5/93, ff. 214-216, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1776.
[15] E. G. Burrows and M. Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 4.
[16] (TNA), PRO, 5/93, ff. 214-216, Howe to Germain, 7 Jul. 1776. Howe's discovery of these American positions persuaded him to land his force on Staten Island, rather than at Gravesend Bay on Long Island as originally planned; Ford, ed., *Writings*, Vol. IV, p. 368, Washington to General Israel Putnam, 25 Aug. 1776.
[17] W. C. Ford, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. IV, 1776 (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), pp. 355-359, Washington to the President of Congress, 20 Aug. 1776; Johnston, *The Campaign of 1776*, p. 106 & pp. 126-131.
[18] Ford, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. IV, 1776, pp. 364-366, Washington to Governor Trumbull, 24 Aug. 1776.

days later, Howe's army on Long Island numbered close to 22,000.[19] Washington countered by sending over 14 more regiments with a paper strength of around 6,000 and the stage was set for the largest battle of the war.[20]

The controversy

The British plan for the Battle of Long Island (*Figure 2*) appears to have been suggested by Clinton. He claimed it as his idea, although it seems possible it may have been first suggested by a British spy two months earlier.[21] It is reasonable to suggest that both men could have arrived at the same basic plan, but while the spy, apparently a former sergeant in the Royal Artillery, may well have informed the British of the layout of the area, it was Clinton who realised that Washington had left unguarded a pass through the Gowanus Heights. Clinton, having scouted the American position after the British landing on Long Island, discovered this serious weakness and constructed a plan accordingly. The Jamaica Road (which ran through the unguarded pass) headed directly for the Brooklyn Heights, via the village of Bedford. Clinton recommended a substantial column should move through this pass under cover of darkness and therefore get behind the Americans' advanced line. Although Clinton believed his plan was not well received by Howe, it was finally adopted (it is difficult to see what objection could have been made to such a simple plan, which promised to unhinge the American defences without the risk of a frontal

[19] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93 ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776; Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 91.
[20] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, pp. 126-131.
[21] T. W. Field, *The Battle of Long Island, with Connected Preceding Events, and the Subsequent American Retreat* (Brooklyn: Long Island Historical Society, 1869), p. 218; Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, p. 139.

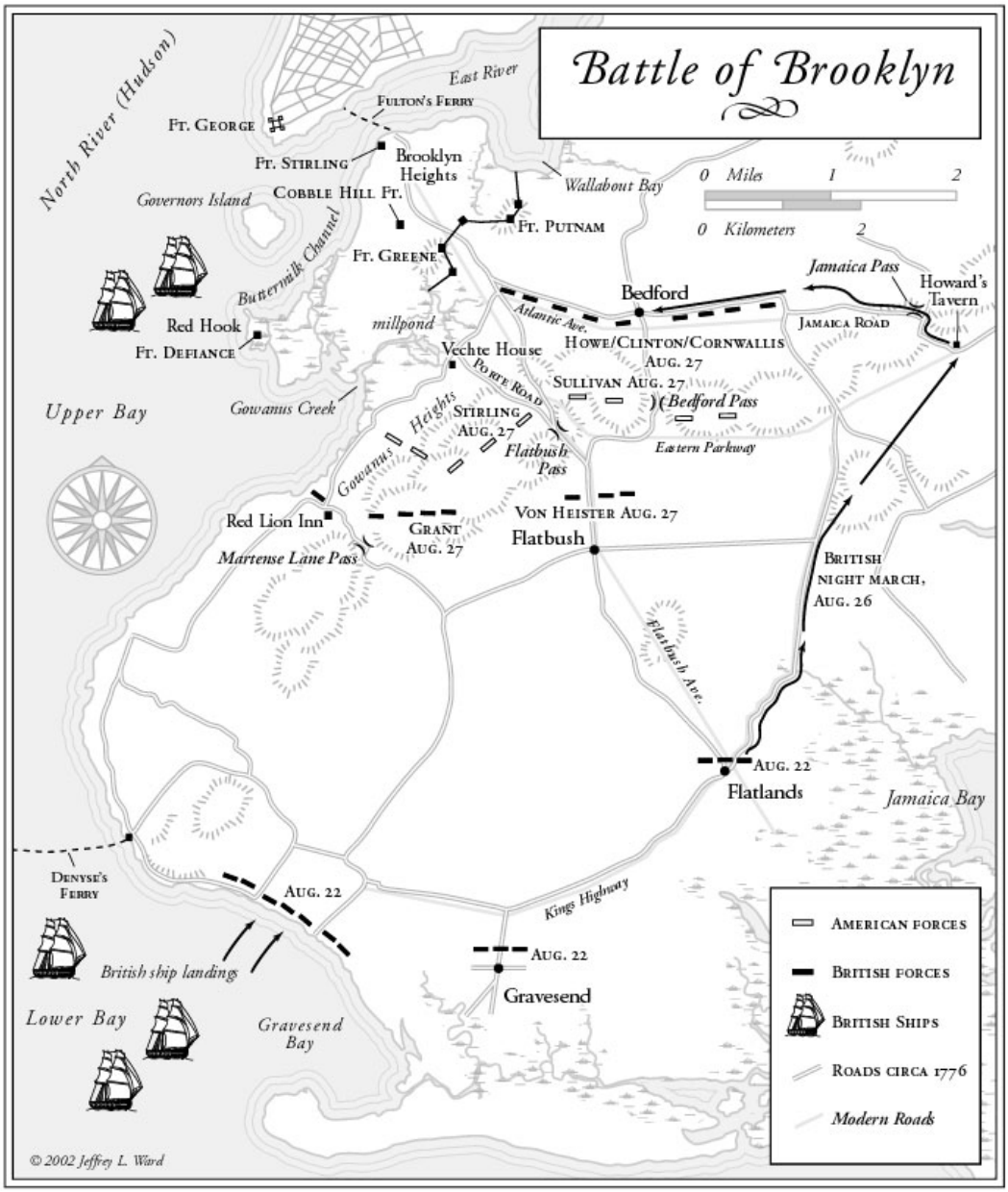

Figure 2: *The Battle of Brooklyn* (Long Island), in Schecter, *The Battle for New York*, p. 133.

assault). On the evening of 26-27 August, a column of 10,000 British soldiers began the march to the Jamaica Pass.[22]

Diversionary actions were staged by British and Hessian forces at two of the guarded passes through the Gowanus Heights, to pin the American defenders and attract reinforcements from the Brooklyn defences. The plan worked flawlessly.

[22] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 5, Clinton's plan of attack for long Island, 25 Aug. 1776.

Having reached Bedford around 8.30am, Howe's force fired two shots to alert the rest of the army that they were in position. The diversionary actions by the British and Hessian forces were then turned into serious assaults and the Americans were soon driven from their defensive works, to be met by Howe's troops in their rear. The fleeing rebels attempted to get back to their lines across the Brooklyn peninsula while British infantry and dragoons attempted to block their line of retreat.[23]

This was the moment when a force of grenadiers and the 33rd Regiment launched an unauthorised assault on one of the American redoubts at Brooklyn. Fort Putnam, as the most advanced point in the American line, is believed to have been the position attacked.[24] This was perhaps the key moment of Howe's career. The event is shrouded in doubt, with eyewitnesses offering wildly differing opinions on the strength of the American defences and Howe's own testimony, at the parliamentary inquiry, only adding more layers of confusion. Few elements of the affair are free from doubt. There is no doubt that it was a grenadier battalion, together with the 33rd Regiment, that was involved in the assault; Howe explicitly identified these units in his report to Germain after the battle.[25] There is also no doubt that it was a determined attack, requiring repeated orders before it was halted, as Howe's report confirmed. Finally, there is no doubt that the troops had exceeded their orders. Clinton admitted that he knew the British were not supposed to press their attack up to the American lines, but claimed that he had not issued a recall because he believed the assault would have been successful and that it would have led to the collapse of the entire rebel position on the island.[26]

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[23] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93 ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.
[24] Ibid., ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776; Ibid., ff. 228-230, Howe to Germain, 6 Aug. 1776.
[25] Ibid., ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.
[26] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 43.

Howe does not appear to have felt the need to defend this decision before his speech at the parliamentary inquiry, almost three years later. In his initial report to Germain, he claimed that it was a concern over taking heavy casualties that caused him to call off the attack, and that the lines could have been taken easily by building siege works rather than storming them. At the inquiry, he added more detail (although it served to confuse matters), explaining his decision in the following manner:

> The rebels had a body of men posted in front of the lines, to guard against a attack from Flat-Bush, and from the lower road upon their right. These troops were defeated with considerable loss. The remainder of the corps was posted behind the lines, the main army being then on York-Island; so that admitting the works to have been forced on the day of action, the only advantage we should have gained would have been the destruction of a few more men, for the retreat of the greatest part would have been secured by the works constructed upon the Heights of Brooklyn, opposite to New-York, and their embarkation covered by a number of floating batteries.[27]

Historians have struggled to understand Howe's decision. Mackesy described the recall of the attacking troops as 'a puzzling episode, never satisfactorily explained'.[28] However, his personal opinion was made clear by his contemptuous description of the strength of the lines under assault. Mackesy considered Howe's evidence at the inquiry as important, suggesting that the British general had believed there was a second line of defensive works in place, which would have covered the retreat of the men in the redoubt his grenadiers were assaulting. Fortescue took Howe's initial explanation for his decision at face value, arguing that the British commander had genuinely felt the lines were too strong to risk a frontal assault. Fortescue astutely pointed out that the opening of siege works by the British was most definitely not what the Americans had hoped for; they had wanted to force Howe into another frontal assault, hopefully with a similar outcome to that on Breed's Hill, and

[27] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 5.
[28] Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 88.

Howe's decision might therefore have held some merit simply by foiling the rebels' battle plan.[29] Anderson wrote sympathetically, explaining that Howe could not have been certain of the strength of the defences and that he may even have believed there was a large body of men posted behind the lines.[30] Gruber acknowledged the missed opportunity, as well as the differences of opinion among the British officers, but made the curious assertion that everyone agreed that the rebel lines were formidable, which was certainly not the case.[31] More recently, Bicheno made the simple observation that the entire affair proved why armies need commanders-in-chief, to prevent unplanned and potentially costly attacks.[32] Black also contended that Howe was right to call a halt to the attack, but only 'for the wrong reasons,'[33] citing the ability of the Royal Navy to trap the remaining rebels on Long Island as rendering an assault unnecessary.

Debate among British and Hessian officers largely focused on the strength of the American defences and the question of whether or not Howe had allowed a decisive victory to slip through his fingers. In *The American Rebellion*, Clinton claimed that the Americans had just 800 men in the lines at Brooklyn.[34] In notes following the delivery of Howe's narrative he wrote that the lines themselves were nothing more than 'an unfinished ditch without pickets or abbatis'.[35] Charles Stedman disagreed with this assessment, believing that abbatis were in place, along with spears or lances to hinder the approach of infantry, but he still believed the defences would not have been able to resist a determined attack, being manned by badly shaken troops, while those under Howe's command were relatively fresh.[36] Major General

[29] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, p. 38.
[30] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, pp. 140-141.
[31] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, pp. 112-115.
[32] Bicheno, *Rebels and Redcoats*, p. 46.
[33] Black, *War for America*, p. 113.
[34] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 44.
[35] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. CXXXVI, f. 12, Clinton's notes on Howe's narrative.
[36] Stedman, *History of the Origin*, pp. 194-195.

James Robertson (who commanded the First Brigade during the battle and later gave evidence at the inquiry) testified that the lines had turned out to be manned by only a few troops (he stated 300 and also claimed to have approached within 150 yards of the lines), but that Howe could not have known that. Robertson also stated his belief that Howe had not been able to make an accurate assessment of the strength of the lines before calling the assaulting troops back.[37]

The Hessian officer Major Baurmeister contradicted these opinions by declaring the lines could have resisted an assault by 50,000 men and were fronted by a picketed double trench.[38] Baurmesiter's account is puzzling, considering he was present at the battle and would, presumably, have seen the lines for himself. No map or testimony from other eyewitnesses supports his assertion that the rebels had 'one work behind another as far as the sea'. Baurmeister was not alone in approving of Howe's caution, however; according to Mackesy, Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie of the Royal Welch Fusiliers believed that most officers felt Howe's prudence had been justified.[39] Perhaps the strongest support for Howe came from Captain John Montresor, who served as his aide-de-camp on Long Island. An engineer with (at the time of the battle) 26 years' experience, Montresor appeared as a witness at the inquiry and declared that the rebel lines were indeed complete and reinforced by five redoubts protected by strong abbatis. Montresor also attested to the fact that Howe had been close enough to make an informed judgement on the strength of the lines and that he (Montresor) agreed completely that an assault would have been extremely costly. The abbatis were so formidable, in fact, that Montresor reported experiencing great difficulty in getting through them after the rebels had evacuated their lines, the

[37] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII, pp. 316 & 396.
[38] Uhlendorf, ed., *Revolution in America*, pp. 39.
[39] Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 88.

obvious implication being that to get through them while under fire would have been even more difficult.[40]

As was the case in so many instances, Howe's narrative failed to answer the questions surrounding his decision and actually added more confusion, by suggesting that the position being stormed by his troops was backed up by further lines behind it. This was not the case, and Howe's statement has several possible explanations. It is possible that he could simply have been misremembering, speaking, as he was, nearly three years after the event. It is possible that Howe was aware of American plans to construct just such a secondary line of defences, incorporating Fort Stirling and Cobble Hill Fort with a third position, planned and laid out but not constructed.[41] Howe made use of spies during his time on Long Island and it is feasible that their reports may have included details on this proposed line.[42] It is equally feasible that he may have been unaware that the line was unfinished. It is possible that Howe misunderstood the nature of the works behind the Brooklyn lines. Cobble Hill Fort mounted just four guns, while Fort Stirling, the first position built on Long Island, was intended to menace British shipping entering the East River. They could not have covered a retreat via Brooklyn Ferry of over 6,000 men while a British army of close to 20,000 advanced on them.[43] Finally, it is possible that Howe's testimony was accurate and that the accepted layout of the American defences at Brooklyn is incorrect.

To aid his recollection, Howe would have had recourse to maps while composing his narrative (as a British victory, maps of the battle were produced quickly for sale to an inquisitive public), which should have compensated for any

[40] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII, pp. 52-55.
[41] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, pp. 77-78.
[42] Field, *Battle of Long Island*, p. 219.
[43] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, pp. 74-77.

lapses in memory. An example of such a map, produced only months after the battle, was one by Samuel Holland (*Figure 3*) and showed a single line of defences.[44] There was great scope for inaccuracy, however, as the British destroyed the rebel works soon after the battle (although the Hessian general von Heister refused to let his troops undertake the work, it is believed that local inhabitants did the job of levelling the lines, and Cornwallis attested that they had been almost completely destroyed by the time he saw them).[45]

Clinton made the comment that Howe may have been in receipt of intelligence that persuaded him not to allow the attack on the rebel lines. It seems obvious that this

Figure 3: Detail from *The Seat of Action, between the British and American Forces* (S. Holland, 1776), Library of Congress.

[44] S. Holland, *The Seat of Action, between the British and American Forces* (London: Robert Sayer and John Bennett, 1776).
[45] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII, p. 9.

was not a genuine attempt to validate Howe's decision; it was more likely written to highlight the fact that, had any such intelligence existed, it had been inaccurate.[46] Howe's statement on the matter in his narrative indirectly suggests he may have had such information, but he made no specific claims regarding receipt of intelligence. Had he indeed heard that the rebels intended building a final fortification, bigger than all the others on Long Island and connected via entrenchments with Cobble Hill and Fort Stirling, then it is possible the British general believed the work might have been finished. In fact, the final fort had only been marked out on the ground and was finally constructed by the British, after they took control of New York. Even then, it was not completed until 1781, at which time it housed 18 guns.[47]

The final possibility, that the accepted layout of the American defences is inaccurate, seems to be unlikely, but there is evidence to support it. The most detailed representation of the American lines was that compiled by Henry P. Johnston (*Figure 4*). This map (based on one produced by the British engineer Bernard Ratzer a decade earlier and United States Coast Survey maps) showed the American works as an uninterrupted line linking three forts and two redoubts. British troops under Vaughan were depicted (marked 'B' on the map) as advancing towards the line, apparently to assault Fort Putnam. Johnston's reconstruction of the American lines was painstaking, detailing (from left to right on *Figure 4*) an unnamed redoubt, Fort Putnam, an oblong redoubt, Fort Greene and Fort Box. Although variations on exact placement are evident in the various maps of the battle, this five-position alignment, linked by entrenchments, has become the standard interpretation.[48] Behind this main

[46] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 43-44.
[47] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, pp. 76-77; H. R. Stiles, *A History of the City of Brooklyn*, Vol. I, (Brooklyn: Published by Subscription, 1867), pp. 313-316.
[48] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*. The map of the Battle of Long Island (*Figure 3*) is included as a separate document with this book; Depictions of the five defensive works, in a single line, appear in S. B. Griffith, *The War for American Independence: from 1760 to the*

Figure 4: *Plan of the Battle of Long Island*, in Johnston, *The Campaign of 1776*.

line was Cobble Hill Fort and Fort Stirling, overlooking the East River.[49] In creating his map, Johnston also had to draw on evidence of the placement of defences along the same line during the War of 1812. The British demolition of the lines immediately after the Battle of Long Island was effective and Johnston admitted that the 1812 works had helped to suggest where the 1776 positions may have been sited. Certainty was not possible.[50]

Surrender at Yorktown in 1781 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 305; Schecter, *The Battle for New York*, p. 133; and Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 96.

[49] Field, *Battle of Long Island*, p. 217.

[50] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, pp. 69-78.

Figure 5: Detail from, *A Plan of the Environs of Brooklyn Showing the Position of the Rebel Lines And Defences On the 27th of August 1776* (G. F. Sproule, 1781), William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

Two contemporary maps present different alignments that could offer an explanation for Howe's confusing testimony. The loyalist engineer George S. Sproule surveyed the field of battle in September 1776 and produced a map in 1781 (*Figure 5*) that differed in one key respect: the addition of a sixth redoubt. (It also included the position of the British fortification completed in 1781, marked 'B', in between Forts Stirling and Cobble Hill, demonstrating how it could have covered a retreat to Brooklyn Ferry had it been completed on the day of battle). The sixth redoubt was depicted as an offshoot of Fort Putnam, connected to it at the rear by a trench, but unconnected with the remainder of the American lines. The representation of topography on this map is detailed and the site of this sixth defensive work seems natural. In fact, it is difficult to see how the Americans could have neglected placing a

work there if the map did indeed display the terrain accurately. Such a discrepancy would not be compelling evidence on its own, but of particular importance is the hand-written annotation, by Clinton, in the top left corner of this map. Clinton, unwilling or unable to let a perceived injustice lie, evidently seized upon this map as proof of Howe missing his golden opportunity to decisively defeat the rebel army. He wrote:

> This map proves that there were no rebel works near the water side of Brooklyn 27 Augt. 76 & consequently S[ir] W[illiam] H[owe] was misinformed & that we might have taken possession at the close of the action and made the Island and all in it ours.[51]

Perhaps Clinton was fixated on the issue of further defensive works behind the main line (the key point in Howe's explanation for his decision to call back the attack) and failed to take note of the extra redoubt on this map, but he was usually fastidious in his attention to detail. Ratzer's map (*Figure 6*), used as the basis for Johnston's reconstruction of the lines, included detail of hills, highlighting the obvious points for forts and redoubts. It is interesting to note that the topography of Sproule's map

Figure 6: Detail from *Plan of the City of New York* (B. Ratzer, 1770), Brooklyn Historical Society.

[51] G. F. Sproule and H. Clinton, *A Plan of the Environs of Brooklyn Showing the Position of the Rebel Lines And Defences On the 27th of August 1776*, 1781.

mostly conforms with that of Ratzer's and the area where Sproule's sixth position is sited is prominent in both, as is the high ground to the right of it, shown on Sproule's map as the position where the British started their approach works.[52]

The second contemporary map (*Figure 7*) is dated 1776 and was found in the chest that held the Clinton Papers, now housed at the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan. (R. G. Adams believed the writing on the map was in Clinton's hand, although it is now believed to be that of the cartographer, Francis Rawdon-Hastings).[53] This map displayed just five rebel works, but one of the largest of them was shown as being completely detached from the main line. A red line,

Figure 7: Detail from *Sketch of the position of the army on Long Island upon the morning of the 26th of August, 1776; with the march on the ensuing night; and the action of the 27th* (F. Rawdon-Hastings , 1776), William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

[52] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, pp. 69-70; B. Ratzer, *Plan of the City of New York*, 1770.
[53] R. G., Adams, *British Headquarters Maps and Sketches used by Sir Henry Clinton while in command of the British Forces operating in North America during the War for Independence, 1775-1782* (Ann Arbor: The William L. Clements Library, 1928), p. 41.

denoting British troops, is shown aligned as if to assault this work (presumably this would be the grenadier battalion and the 33rd Regiment). A comment on the time it had taken for Howe to open the 1776 campaign can be read into the line 'Iam demum movet arma Leo', written at the bottom of the map, which roughly translates as 'at last the lion moves into battle'.[54]

The importance of these two contemporary maps, each showing a rebel work either completely detached from the main line of defence, or connected only at the rear, is that they potentially support Howe's confusing testimony during the inquiry. From the British position in front of the lines, it seems possible that a redoubt connected to the rest of the line only at its rear (as in *Figure 5*) might have appeared to have been supported by a defensive line behind it. A redoubt entirely isolated (as in *Figure 7*) would undeniably have been supported by the line behind it. Obviously, even these two maps disagree on the layout of the American defences and therefore neither can be considered entirely reliable.

The strength of the American defences

Even if it is assumed that these two maps were inaccurate in their depiction of the lines, and that Johnston's reconstruction came closer to the actual layout, a question remains in relation to the strength of the lines and number of men the rebels had posted there to resist an attack. Washington is believed to have had between 7,000 and 9,000 men on Long Island on the morning of 27 August (the paper strengths of the regiments, taken from the returns of 12 September and including sick, was around

[54] F. Rawdon-Hastings and H. Clinton, *Sketch of the position of the army on Long Island upon the morning of the 26th of August, 1776; with the march on the ensuing night; and the action of the 27th*, 1776; WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XIX, f. 34, Clinton memo (partly in cipher), 1776.

9,500).[55] Given that about 2,800 were holding the Gowanus Heights, this left the Americans with approximately 4-6,000 men with which to man their main defensive line.[56] (It must be remembered that Washington himself was unsure of how many men he had committed to the defence of Long Island, due to the absence of proper returns at the time.)[57] Both Clinton and Robertson claimed the lines were thinly manned when the grenadiers and 33rd Regiment made their unauthorised assault, yet it seems inconceivable that the Americans, who were hoping to inflict heavy casualties on a frontal assault by the British, had neglected to man the lines they had prepared in the months leading up to the battle to their full capacity.[58]

Having thrown up respectable works overnight at Breed's Hill and later on the Dorchester Heights, in Boston, they had enjoyed quiet months to perfect the lines and the string of redoubts at Brooklyn. Lee had submitted his plan for the fortification and defence of New York in March 1776, mentioning the need for a battery on the Brooklyn Heights to command the East River.[59] Captain Jeduthan Baldwin then documented the progress of fortifications on Long Island throughout March and April. (Baldwin had also been present at Boston and had assisted in the building of fortifications on the Dorchester Heights, referring to them with justifiable pride as 'a very great work for one night'.[60]) It is possible that the Americans worked best when under pressure, because the constructions around New York progressed more slowly (the British army was not there to impose a deadline), but Baldwin specifically mentioned working on numerous fortifications on Long Island in April, meaning that

[55] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, pp. 126-131.
[56] 'Account of the Battle of Long Island', *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, 2 Oct. 1776, cited in Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, Part II, pp. 158-60.
[57] Ford, ed., *Writings*, Vol. IV, pp. 369-371, Washington to the President of Congress, 26 Aug. 1776.
[58] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 44; *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII, p. 396.
[59] Walker, ed., *Engineers of Independence*, pp. 114-116.
[60] T. W. Baldwin, *The Revolutionary Journal of Col. Jeduthan Baldwin, 1775-1778* (Bangor: De Burians, 1906), p. 29.

the rebels had at least four months to construct their defences before the British landed on 22 August.[61]

How many of the soldiers behind the lines at Brooklyn would actually have been able to man them (in other words, what capacity the defensive works had) is not certain, but estimates can be made. The clearest indication of the numbers of men each position could accommodate is contained in general orders from Nathanael Greene, on 1 June. Greene ordered five companies to take position in Fort Box, five in Fort Greene, three in the oblong redoubt, five in Fort Putnam and three in the final, unnamed redoubt on the left. In addition, Greene mentioned a further three companies to take position 'upon the right of Fort Greene,'[62] presumably manning the entrenchments between Forts Box and Greene. The three regiments involved (there were eight companies per regiment), were Colonel Varnum's, Colonel Hitchcock's and Colonel Little's, of Brigadier General John Nixon's Brigade, numbering an estimated 391, 368 and 453 troops, respectively.[63] (These numbers are based on the returns from 12 September and include sick, of which there was a large proportion in Washington's army at the time. The actual number of men present in the lines may therefore have been reduced by anything up to a third.) This would give a total of approximately 700-1,050 men in the five works, with a further 100-150 in the lines between Forts Box and Greene.

This estimate of around 800-1,200 total troops is enlightening, as it is potentially a perfect match for Clinton's estimate, although it would still dwarf that of Robertson. There would also have been capacity for further men in the entrenchments

[61] Baldwin, *Revolutionary Journal*, pp. 31-34; (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.
[62] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, Part II, p. 15, Gen. Greene's Orders, 1 Jun. 1776.
[63] Ibid., p. 130; R. K. Wright, *The Continental Army* (Washington D. C.: Center of Military History, 1983), p. 47. Wright confirmed the standard eight-company format of a Continental Army regiment in 1776, with a theoretical total of 728 officers and men, but acknowledged that unit strengths were usually far below this.

connecting the rest of the fortifications. The exact distributions ordered by Greene were not maintained (Varnum's regiment was relocated to Fort Defiance on Red Hook prior to the battle, although Little's remained in Fort Greene), but it seems likely that roughly equal numbers of men would have been assigned to the lines on 27 August; there was no shortage of troops and by the time the British reached the lines the battle had been underway for several hours.[64] It is uncertain how many men could have been usefully placed between the five strongpoints, in the connecting entrenchments (the composition of these trenches is simply not known in great enough detail), but if 150 could be placed between Forts Box and Greene, then at least that number would seem possible for each of the two connecting lines between Fort Greene, the oblong redoubt and Fort Putnam. This was the very heart of the American lines, crossing the road that led down to Brooklyn Ferry. These estimates may be conservative, but it is clear that only a portion of the approximately 4-6,000 troops available could have effectively manned the chain of forts and redoubts, almost certainly less than half.

When jotting down his thoughts on Howe's narrative (almost three years after the battle), Clinton made the remarkable assertion that Fort Putnam was the only fortification in the line of defences that was manned, and that the connecting entrenchments were only manned to the left of Fort Putnam (i.e. between Fort Putnam and the unnamed redoubt).[65] A separate note also made the claim that just one of the rebel redoubts had been manned.[66] His final version of events, as laid out in *The American Rebellion*, made no such claim, and the Rawdon-Hastings map (*Figure 6*),

[64] J. M. Varnum, *A Sketch of the Life and Public Services of James Mitchell Varnum of Rhode Island* (Boston: David Clapp & Son, 1906), pp10-11; Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, Part II, p. 43, Col. Moses Little to his son, 1 Sep. 1776.
[65] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. CXXXVI, f. 12, Clinton's notes on Howe's Narrative.
[66] Ibid., Vol. XVIII, f. 29. Although filed in an earlier volume, these notes make clear reference to Howe's Narrative, dating them in the second half of 1779 at the earliest.

clearly marked rebel troops in place both in the forts and redoubts and behind the connecting entrenchments, with further bodies of troops behind in reserve. Clinton's private notes on Howe's narrative and the text that formed the basis for *The American Rebellion* were produced by a man who was determined to exonerate his own conduct (this was always the case with Clinton, but especially so after he had been recalled as commander-in-chief in 1782), even at the expense of others. The possibility exists, therefore, that in his recollection of Long Island, Clinton was not entirely truthful. It is possible to accept that he genuinely believed there were only 800 men in the defensive lines (that would depend on how close an inspection he had been able to make), but it is not possible to accept that Fort Putnam was the only position with any garrison at all. Colonel Little, in Fort Greene, reported witnessing the advance of British infantry and cavalry before they 'retreated being met with a smart fire from our breast works,'[67] proving that Americans had manned other sections of the line. The Rawdon-Hastings map offers support for this assertion, clearly marking the advance of infantry and a body of cavalry (the 17th Light Dragoons was the only cavalry with Howe's army at the time) towards Fort Greene. It seems clear that the grenadiers/33rd Regiment assault was not the only example of British troops approaching the rebel lines, and this second tentative assault appears to have been called off without any need for intervention from Howe – he certainly did not mention it in any documents or in his narrative. Therefore, as well as common sense suggesting that the Americans would not have left their defensive works mostly empty on the day of battle, there is also evidence supporting the assertion that the lines were manned.

The quality of the men in the lines is another matter and was influenced by the manner in which the Americans' defensive strategy evolved over the summer.

[67] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, Part II, p. 43, Col. Moses Little to his son, 1 Sep. 1776.

Initially, the intention appears to have been to force the British to mount a costly frontal assault on the Brooklyn lines.[68] Later, the Gowanus Heights were incorporated into the plan as an advanced line and by the end of August Washington had changed the focus of his plan entirely, intending to stop the British from penetrating the Gowanus Heights and thus ordering Putnam to place his best troops on the passes through these advanced positions to 'at all hazards prevent the enemy's passing the wood, and approaching your works'.[69] The Brooklyn lines were therefore downgraded and were to be manned only by militia (Washington certainly saw this as a downgrading; his orders to Putnam made it clear that he felt the militia were his worst troops and only good enough to man defensive lines). The battle report of Captain Stephen Olney supported this, and went further. According to Olney, the Brooklyn lines were 'poorly manned with sick and invalids'.[70] It is not clear what the plan was should the British force a way through the Gowanus Heights, but Olney believed that Washington expected to be able to pull the defenders back into the Brooklyn lines. This would have been risky, as men forced from one defensive line might be badly shaken by the time they had retreated to a second. It would also make the failure to defend the Jamaica Pass even more inexplicable. If Washington had indeed hoped that his men would be able to retire in reasonable order from the Gowanus Heights, then the sudden appearance of thousands of British troops between them and the Brooklyn defences would throw such a plan into chaos. In the event, what might have been planned as an organised withdrawal into the Brooklyn lines instead became a disorganised scramble and many witnesses testified to the fact that

[68] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, Part II, p. 17, Gen. Greene's Orders, 17 Jun. 1776. Greene ordered that the lines were to be defended 'to the last extremity'.
[69] Ford, ed., *Writings*, Vol. IV, p. 368, Washington to Putnam, 25 Aug. 1776.
[70] Field, *Battle of Long Island*, p. 518.

they had been forced to make their way through the marshy ground at the western end of the Brooklyn lines (several men drowned during the crossing).[71]

These retreats via the marshes appear to have been an improvisation. Colonel Samuel Miles reported attempting to retreat directly to the lines, only to find the way blocked by British troops, while Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Brodhead claimed that he had been able to reach the lines just before the British cut his men off. Major Benjamin Tallmadge's report also told how his men had been able to retire within the Brooklyn lines upon the advance of the British.[72] This evidence meshes with the original battle report of Howe, in which he described how the grenadiers had pursued fleeing rebels towards their main redoubt and had then turned their pursuit into an attempted storming of that redoubt.[73] If rebel soldiers were retreating in disorder directly into their lines, and if some of them were successfully taking up positions within those lines, it would suggest that the abbatis in front of them were not as impenetrable as Montresor's evidence claimed. Brodhead's report strongly suggests that it was Fort Putnam that he and his men retreated to. Immediately after getting back into a redoubt, he claimed his men had to repel a British assault and were then moved a mile and a half to the right of the line to cover the retreat of American troops retiring over the marsh. As the entire extent of the rebel line was about a mile and a half it seems likely that Brodhead's men had retreated into Fort Putnam and then helped to resist the assault of the grenadiers and 33rd Regiment, before being shifted to the opposite flank.

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[71] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, Part II, pp. 50-51, John Ewing to Judge Yeates, 14 Sep. 1776; Ibid., pp. 51-52, Col. John Haslet to Hon. Caesar Rodney, 31 Aug. 1776; Ibid., pp. 60-63, Journal of Col. Samuel Miles.
[72] Ibid., pp. 60-63, Journal of Col. Samuel Miles; Ibid., pp. 63-66, Lieut. Col. Daniel Brodhead to unknown, 5 Sep. 1776; Ibid., pp. 77-81, Major Tallmadge's Account of the Battles of Long Island and White Plains.
[73] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.

The second element to consider when assessing the strength of the rebel defences is the quality of the lines themselves. Almost incredibly, given the many months the Americans had to construct their defensive works, evidence abounds that the lines had been incomplete even on the morning of battle. Colonel Gold Silliman wrote to his wife on 24 August, including the information that his men were engaged in completing breastworks in the defensive line, while Tallmadge noted that the lines were so weak on the day of battle that he was amazed the British had not stormed them.[74] Brigadier General John Morin Scott, who was ordered to Long Island after the battle had commenced, wrote how the lines had still been incomplete when he arrived: 'they were unfinished in several places when I arrived there, and we were obliged to hastily finish them'.[75] Scott's testimony, shocking enough already, went on to reveal that the lines were even incomplete across the main road leading through the works (and down to Brooklyn Ferry). In other words, the most obvious route of approach for the British was undefended at the moment when American troops were being pushed back from the Gowanus Heights. The hastily built line was weak in Scott's opinion, and three of his battalions were placed behind it (the paper strengths of the four battalions in Scott's brigade were noted as 510, 297, 459 and 261).[76] Scott further attested that this central section of the lines was in a vulnerable position, being commanded by an area of higher ground just 40 yards to its front. In fact, he claimed that anyone posted on that higher ground would have been able to shoot under the belly of his horse as he stood behind the lines.

Further corroborating evidence comes from the decision to evacuate Long Island on 29 August. Sixth among the reasons for evacuating noted by the council of

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[74] Johnston, *Campaign of 1776*, Part II, pp. 52-53, Col. Gold S. Silliman to his wife, 24 Aug. 1776; Ibid., pp. 77-81, Major Tallmadge's Account.
[75] Ibid., p. 37, Brig. Gen. Scott to John Jay, 6 Sep. 1776.
[76] Ibid., p. 127.

war was the weakness of the lines. The forts and redoubts themselves were acknowledged as being strong, but the entrenchments between them were anything but, with weak abbatis. They could not provide suitable cover for the men behind them and the Americans feared they would be forced if the British attacked. The council also noted that the positions on the Gowanus Heights had been the principal position in the entire Long Island defences.[77]

The American position on the Brooklyn Heights was, therefore, undeniably weak and Clinton appears to have sensed this, as shown by his willingness to allow the British troops to exceed their orders and begin an assault on the lines. Evidence suggests that Howe was also close enough to the lines to make an estimate of their strength. Montresor attested that he had accompanied the general in his role as aide-de-camp for the entire day and, as he himself had been close enough to make a judgement on the rebel lines, Howe presumably had been as well.[78] Further circumstantial evidence rests on the accepted sequence of events. Howe stated, and it was confirmed by Clinton, that it had taken a direct order to halt the assault of the British troops. Howe did not deliver that order personally (Clinton noted that it was Captain Balfour that delivered Howe's order),[79] but he had been close enough to the action to decide that intervention was called for. Had he been at a great distance from the critical point he would first of all have been unable to know exactly what was going on closer to the lines and, secondly, would not have been able to get a message to the rampant troops quickly enough to stop them. It is also telling that, among Germain's many letters to Howe in the aftermath of the battle, was the one in which he passed on the King's concern that he (Howe) ought not to be so willing to risk his

[77] Ford, ed., *Writings*, Vol. IV, pp. 374-375, notes on the council of war, 29 Aug. 1776.
[78] *Parliamentary History*, Vol. XII, p. 52.
[79] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 29. Notes written after the publication of Howe's Narrative.

own safety when leading his army. It is not clear what the King had heard of Howe's conduct at the battle that prompted this, but it seems likely he had read or heard of Howe being in the thick of the action.[80]

Howe's decision

In Chapter Two it was shown how a level of indiscipline within his army may have influenced Howe's thinking at this point. It is possible to argue that the strength or weakness of the American defences at Brooklyn did not even enter into Howe's decision; he may have simply been unhappy that his precise orders not to assault the lines were being ignored. In the heat of battle, as he saw troops advancing towards a rebel fort, he would have had little time to weigh up the options and carefully consider the risks. If he was to recall the men before they got too close to the fort, the decision would need to be quick, almost instinctive. Clinton's gut reaction to the situation was to allow the troops to attack. Howe's was to restrain them. His decision evidently was a speedy one; combined casualty returns for the grenadiers and the 33rd Regiment indicate a total of just two fatalities, with 20 wounded, indicating that they had not approached the redoubt too closely before being ordered back.[81] (Although it is not certain which of the four grenadier battalions was present at this point, the Second Battalion was certainly not, being with Cornwallis and taking part in the separate attack on the American right flank. The casualties quoted omit those of this battalion.)[82]

It is again important to stress that there is no indication that Howe doubted his men could successfully storm the redoubt in question. His own statement in his report

[80] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 4; Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 43; Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 42-43, Germain to Howe, 18 Oct. 1776.
[81] Force, *American Archives*, Fifth Series, Vol. I, p. 1258.
[82] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.

to Germain, that he believed they would have taken the redoubt, seems to have been an honest one. Howe's concern was that an unplanned, indisciplined assault, without proper back-up from other units, might prove costly. By the time he came to defend his decision at the parliamentary inquiry, his thinking may have become muddled. Even if the layout of the American defences had created the impression of a secondary line of works, justifying that curious assertion in his narrative, there is more evidence that his understanding of the battle he had fought was flawed. The draft of his narrative contains several differences from the final version, illuminating Howe's concern over this point and also a level of confusion. From his draft, it is clear that Howe had originally intended to tackle the criticism of his decision head on, acknowledging that his critics claimed:

> … that had I directed the attack on the enemy's lines, the consequence would have been the demolition of the rebel army, and the consequence of that, a termination of the war.[83]

It is possible that, after writing this, Howe saw the enormity of the charge against him (nothing less than having failed to take an opportunity to end the war). He deleted the above passage, inserting instead the famous quotation from his letter to Germain, which focused solely on whether or not a single redoubt might have been taken.[84] Having thus taken care to downplay the importance of the decision, he went on to give his confusing testimony on the layout of the rebel defences. The draft shows that Howe had originally intended to estimate the rebel strength on the Gowanus Heights as 'about 6,000,'[85] a grossly inflated number that suggests Howe may not have had a clear understanding of the battle. This impression is reinforced by an assertion in the draft that the rebels suffered losses of approximately 2,700 in

[83] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 9.
[84] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.
[85] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 9.

killed, wounded and captured men. This inaccurate assessment (the rebels lost 1,097 prisoners according to Howe's own report and are generally reckoned to have suffered total losses of less than 1,500)[86] was replaced with the more restrained assertion that the rebels had suffered 'considerable loss'.[87]

Howe's confusion about the layout of the rebel lines is highlighted by another amendment. In referring to the supposed second line of rebel defences 'upon the heights of Brooklyn, opposite to New York,'[88] Howe had originally intended to be more specific, writing 'upon the heights of Brooklyn, upon the crest of the hill opposite to New York'[89]. This could only refer to Fort Stirling, the original fortification constructed on Long Island, designed to prevent British shipping from entering the East River. Although it could possibly have mounted some resistance to a British movement towards Brooklyn Ferry, it was nowhere near big enough to have protected the remains of Washington's army. Composing the narrative some time after the actual events, it is therefore clear that Howe was uncertain about key facts of the battle.

Elements that helped to shape his period in command (his fallings out with Clinton, von Heister and Germain) had yet to manifest themselves fully at the time of the Battle of Long Island. On the day of the battle, the most recent correspondence from Germain was that of 11 June, received by Howe on 12 August. This would mostly have made for comforting reading; Germain praised everything Howe had done and everything he was planning to do. However, there was one hint of pressure, right at the end of the letter, when Germain suggested that the defeat of the rebels at Quebec might once more open a window of opportunity for ending the rebellion in a

[86] Force, *American Archives*, Fifth Series, Vol. I, p. 1258.
[87] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 5.
[88] Ibid.
[89] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 9.

single campaign.[90] As shown in Chapter 3, Howe had been backing away from his initial claim, made back in June 1775, that he could finish the war in one campaign. Just two days prior to receiving Germain's letter, Howe had sent one himself, admitting that he fully expected to need a second campaign and he may have been concerned by Germain's perspective on the matter.[91] At this, stage, however, there was still a solid working relationship between the two men, even if it was built on a mutual misunderstanding of the other's aims and intentions.

Clinton had returned from his southern expedition in a prickly mood and was keen to press ideas on Howe, partly to prove that his late arrival had not adversely affected the 1776 campaign. Howe had no reason at this stage, however, to think that he had lost the respect of his second-in-command; this was a process that had only just started. Likewise, although Howe and von Heister were never to work well together, Long Island came very early in their relationship and although Howe appears to have taken an instant dislike to the Hessian general, there was only slight friction (concerning von Heister's insistence that his troops be rested before going into battle) between them.

It therefore seems that Howe had as free a hand as he was ever to enjoy when executing his plans at the Battle of Long Island. His army was stronger than he had originally requested. It does not appear that there were any external considerations that were weighing unduly on his mind or potentially affecting his judgement. The battle plan was executed flawlessly and there is no reason to believe that anything other than the wellbeing of his troops was at the heart of his decision to call back the unauthorised assault on the rebel lines. Howe later made it clear that he was aware of

[90] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 183-188, Germain to Howe, 11 Jun. 1776.
[91] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 37, Howe to Germain, 10 Aug. 1776.

how important his army was and how difficult it would be to replace substantial losses.[92]

Considerations of whether Howe ought to have realised that the battle was presenting an opportunity to deliver a mortal blow to the American army, or whether he should have been more prepared to take a calculated risk given what was at stake, are interesting debating points, but there is no way of knowing exactly what he had seen of the rebel lines when he made his decision. In many ways, Howe was the victim of the quite shocking performance of the American army. His limited experience of operations against them, at Bunker Hill and to a lesser extent on the Dorchester Heights, had given him ample reason to respect them, at least when placed behind defensive works.[93] There was no reason for him to suspect that the lines at Brooklyn would have been any less formidable, or would have been defended any less stubbornly, than those at the top of Breed's Hill had been. There was no reason for him to suspect that, having had months to perfect their works, the rebel lines had actually been incomplete on the very morning of the battle, or that they had been thinly manned by the weakest troops under Washington's command. Only the knowledge of these facts after the event contrive to make Howe's decision seem questionable.

What can be surmised is that this battle was the most revealing of Howe's temperament as a military commander. The many factors that were gradually to erode his confidence in his position had not yet come into play – he had no garrisons to maintain and no casualties to deal with, he enjoyed the support of political superiors and junior officers and he had almost complete freedom of movement thanks to his brother's fleet. He faced a considerably weaker enemy that obligingly offered battle.

[92] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 283-284, Howe to Germain, 25 Sep. 1776.
[93] Ibid., ff. 33-36, Howe to Dartmouth, 16 Jan. 1776. Howe remarked of the rebels that 'neither is their army by any means to be despised'.

That Howe, under these almost perfect conditions, chose to act with caution rather than with dash, is as strong a testimony to his inherently cautious nature as can be found.

II: The Battle of White Plains

Following the Battle of Long Island, Howe employed a policy of manoeuvring the Americans off Manhattan rather than seeking battle. Despite Clinton again pressing for a landing in the Americans' rear, Howe chose to land his troops at Kip's Bay on 15 September 1776 (*Figure 8*).[94] Washington had already evacuated the bulk of his army from the city, moving them to the Harlem Heights at the northern end of Manhattan, meaning that Howe's choice of landing place only threatened to cut off the 5,000 or so troops remaining in the city. In the event, these troops were also able to evacuate on the day of Howe's landing. The British army took possession of the city that evening, but were unable to inflict any losses on the Americans.[95]

It was to be almost a month before Howe moved again, and once more his chosen mode of proceeding was an amphibious operation, this time landing at Throg's Neck, in Westchester County. This allowed Lord Howe to demonstrate his skill, navigating the fleet through the dangerous waters of Hell's Gate in the East River with the loss of just one artillery boat, but the landing spot turned out to be unsuitable, being cut off from the mainland at high tide.[96] It was easily held by a small party of

[94] WCL, Clinton papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 19, Clinton memo, 15 Sep. 1776.
[95] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 274-276, Howe to Germain, 21 Sep. 1776.
[96] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 49.

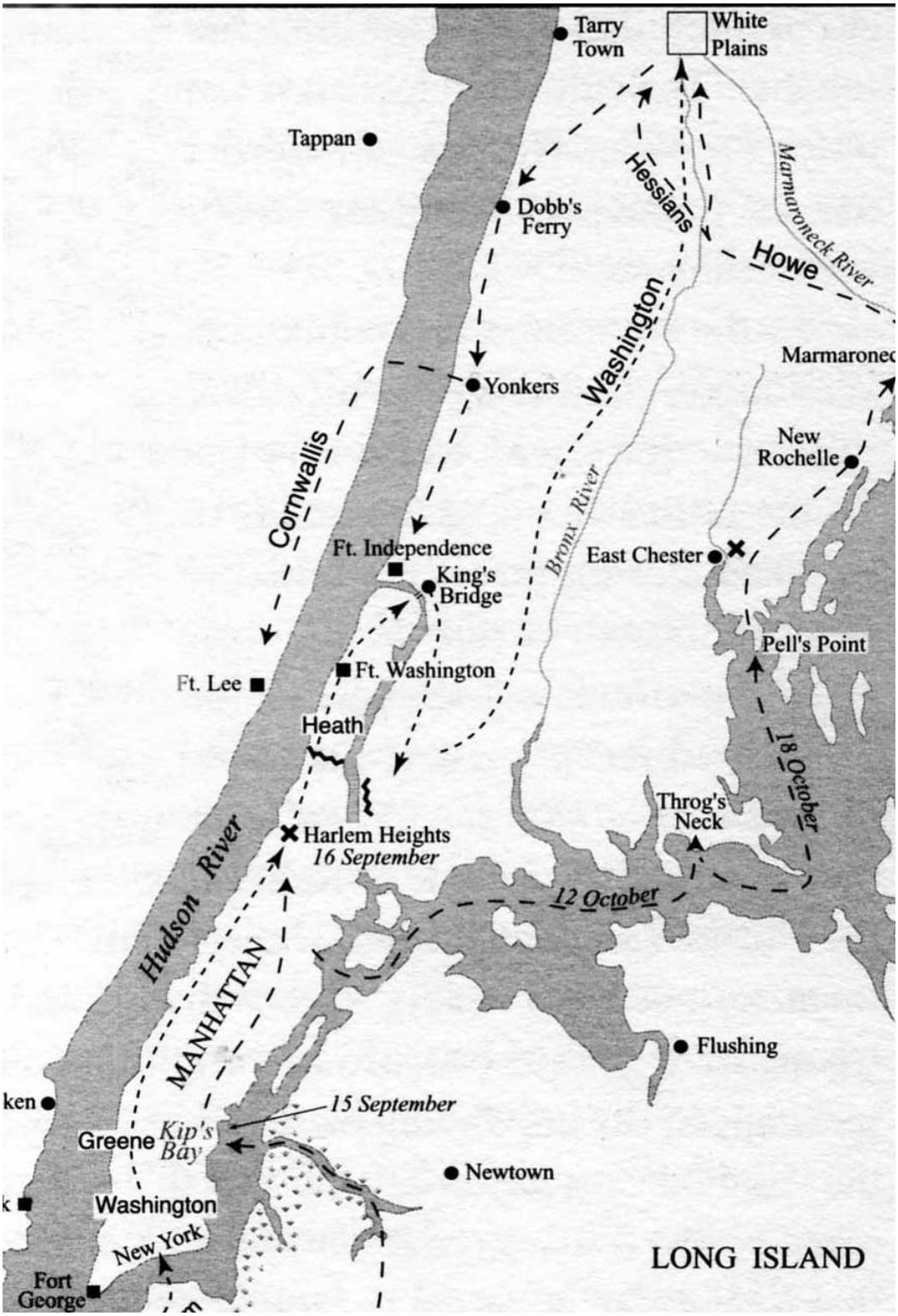

Figure 8: *New York Campaign, August–October 1776*, in Bicheno, *Rebels and Redcoats*, p. 43.

rebels and Howe was forced to re-embark his men five days later, landing them instead at Pell's Point.[97] The delay gave Washington the opportunity to evacuate

[97] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.

Manhattan and relocate to White Plains. Howe shadowed the movements of the American army, which eventually took up a defensive position on a line of hills and awaited the approach of the British.

The Controversy

On 28 October, Howe ordered his men to take possession of a hill on the extreme right of the American lines (*Figure 9*). This position, Chatterton (or Chatterton's) Hill, was isolated and vulnerable, being separated from the rest of the American forces by the Bronx River. The fighting on the hill was severe and Howe's losses were steep, but the controversy over White Plains focussed on the subsequent failure

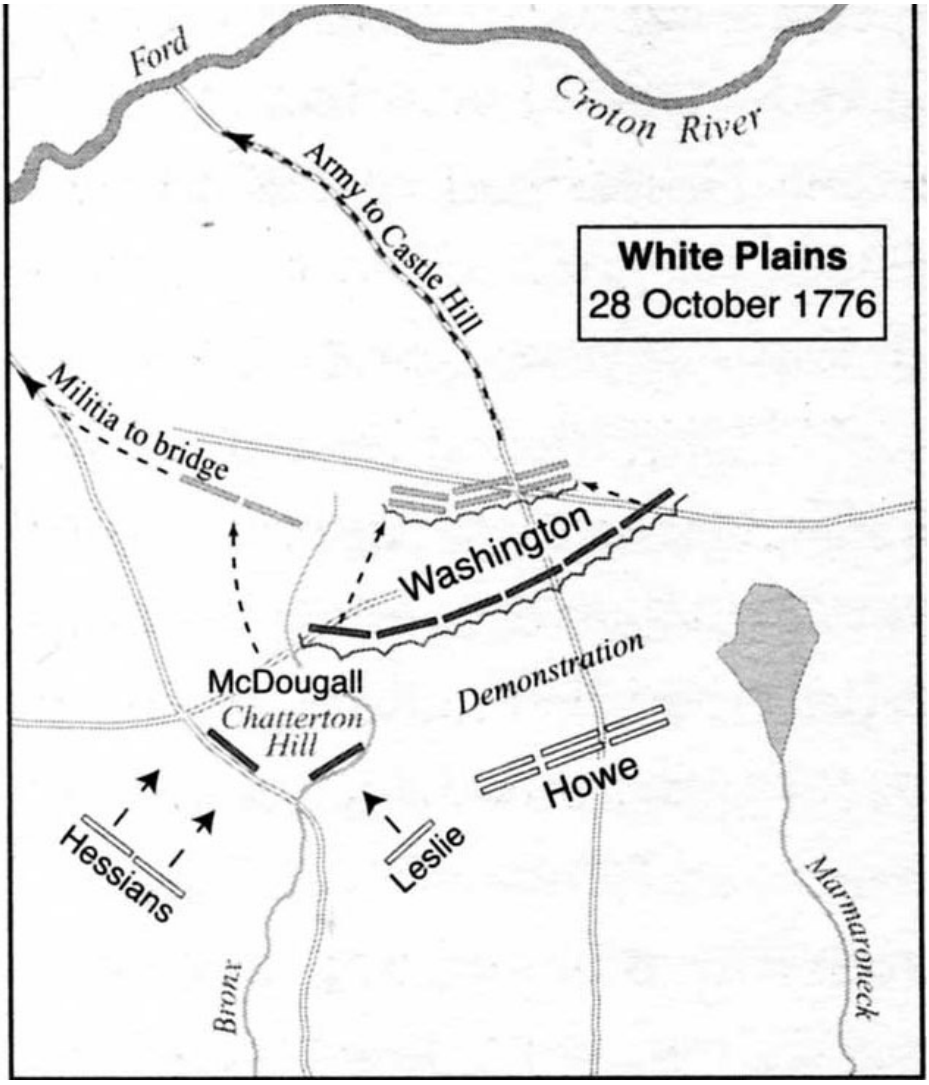

Figure 9: *White Plains, 28 October 1776,* in Bicheno, *Rebels and Redcoats*, p. 43.

to launch a full-scale assault on the American lines.[98] This was the first entry in Germain's notes for the handling of a possible inquiry into Howe's command.[99] As was the case with Long Island, Howe did not seem to have felt any need to defend his actions prior to the inquiry itself. His report to Germain mentioned that he had twice intended to launch major attacks. The first, on 29 October, had been deferred because the rebels had strengthened their defensive works and Howe had felt the need to call up reinforcements from the New York garrison. The second had been planned for the afternoon of 31 October, but bad weather had intervened and the Americans had withdrawn to stronger positions during the night. Howe made the comment that he was now sure that Washington was avoiding a major battle and saw little point in pressing on. He made no further efforts to bring Washington to action and the Battle of White Plains was over.

During his narrative, Howe completely ignored the planned attacks on 29 and 31 October, instead focussing on the perception that he had missed an opportunity to launch a major assault on 28 October, the day of the action on Chatterton's Hill. Whereas he had defended his recall of the troops at Long Island through confusing and possibly inaccurate testimony regarding the layout of the American defences, when it came to White Plains, he simply stated that a major assault had been intended on the 28th, adding:

> The committee must give me credit when I assure them, that I have political reasons, and no other, for declining to explain why that assault was not made. Upon a minute enquiry those reasons might, if necessary, be brought out in evidence at the bar.[100]

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[98] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776; Fortsecue, *War of Independence*, pp. 42-43. British casualties were 214 killed and wounded, while the Hessians lost 99 men.
[99] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 89-90, 'Hints for the management of an intended enquiry', 1777 or 1778.
[100] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 6-7.

Howe went on to offer the familiar-sounding reasoning that even had the assault been made and the rebel lines taken, Washington's army would have been able to retreat without major loss. Howe's 'political reasons' have obviously been considered by historians, but few have offered a judgement. Bellamy Partridge believed that the statement was an improvisation, an act of desperation by Howe, who found himself struggling and reached for 'a trump card'.[101] Partridge's assertion is undermined by the draft of Howe's narrative, which proves that this was a planned part of the speech. Fortescue made no attempt to hazard a guess as to what the political reasons may have been, but again took Howe at his word in so far as the Americans' ability to retreat was concerned.[102] Barnet Schecter believed that the heavy toll Howe had paid for possessing Chatterton's Hill had dissuaded him from further offensive movements, while Mackesy echoed Howe's sentiments that Washington was by now adopting a Fabian strategy, refusing to be drawn into a major engagement. Mackesy also noted that Howe was having to proceed with caution due to a lack of adequate maps of the area.[103] Anderson believed Howe was referring to the receipt of intelligence from a spy regarding the layout of Fort Washington, and that he had turned away from White Plains to take a far easier prize, but this did not seem likely even before the new evidence in the draft of Howe's narrative.[104]

This new evidence goes beyond the simple statement by Howe that von Heister had refused to order the Hessians to attack (as covered in Chapter 2).[105] The manuscript source also suggests strongly that Howe, even though he removed the passage directly blaming von Heister, would have been able to get his point across

[101] Partridge, *Sir Billy Howe*, pp. 237-238.
[102] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, pp. 42-43.
[103] Schecter, *Battle for New York*, p. 240; Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 91.
[104] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, pp. 193-194.
[105] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 21.

perfectly well in the House of Commons. A section in the draft that survived revisions appears innocuous in printed versions of Howe's narrative, in which he is quoted as saying that '… an assault upon the enemy's right, which was opposed to the Hessian troops was intended.'[106] The draft shows that Howe intended to emphasise two of the words in this sentence, by underlining them. The draft therefore reads, ''… an assault upon the enemy's right, which was opposed to the Hessian troops was intended.'[107] Assuming Howe retained this emphasis in the delivery of the final version of his speech, it seems apparent that anyone listening would have realised that he was attributing blame to the Hessians, while not wishing to state it outright. Howe originally intended to make things even clearer by following his refusal to elaborate on his political reasons with the sentence 'I shall here only say, that they would in no degree affect my honour or my conduct'.[108] Howe obviously felt that neither this extra sentence, nor the fuller explanation of von Heister's dissent, were necessary to get his point across. This seems to have been amply justified in the reaction he received. Partridge claimed that this section of Howe's speech ought to, and may well have, caused uproar in the House, but there is no evidence to support this.[109] Questioning of witnesses after Howe's speech suggests that his message had been received and understood. Cornwallis was the first to be examined, and as well as his reluctant answers to Howe's questions, he was also asked by an unspecified member of the house about the affair at White Plains. Cornwallis replied:

> What I call political reasons relates to no order from hence, or any thing in which English politics are concerned; perhaps the word political is not a proper one, but I do not know what word to substitute in its place.[110]

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[106] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 6.
[107] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 15.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Partridge, *Sir Billy Howe*, p. 238.
[110] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII, p. 15.

Cornwallis was then asked point blank: 'Did the Hessian infantry refuse to charge?'[111] Cornwallis equivocated in his response, insisting that the Hessian troops had displayed great bravery in America, but neglecting to deny that they had refused to attack. This question strongly suggests that Howe had got his message across and it now seems clear that his political reasons referred only to the fact that a strong Hessian contingent was still serving in America. Openly blaming them for the failure to attack at White Plains might seriously damage the working relationship between the British and Hessian forces in a war that was not yet lost.

The new evidence in the draft of the narrative does not, however, completely resolve the matter. There remains the question of exactly when Howe issued this order to von Heister. In his original report to Germain, Howe gave reasons why major assaults had not been made on 29 and 31 October, yet in his narrative he only defended his decision not to launch an assault on 28 October, immediately after the move to take Chatterton's Hill. The deleted passage from the draft of the narrative claimed that Howe had asked von Heister to attack the right wing of the Americans, and that he had refused, but no date for this was specified. Howe went on to state that, following von Heister's refusal, he had spoken to Clinton, asking him to lead the assault with British troops.[112] Clinton wrote at some length on the events at White Plains in his own narrative of the war, but did not mention any such conversation with Howe. There was, however, the intriguing statement that he had been present during the assault on Chatterton's Hill. This is important, because the assault was undertaken by the left wing of Howe's army, while Clinton was commanding the right wing, opposite the centre of the American lines and therefore at least a mile from

[111] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII, p. 16.
[112] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 21.

Chatterton's Hill.[113] Clinton wrote in detail about the assault on the hill (noting especially how the British officer leading the attack had stopped to fire a musket, causing the advance to lose momentum and, finally, to be repelled).[114]

What Clinton was doing so close to the assault, when his original station had been with the right wing, is a question that is answered by one of his memoranda. This explained how, as soon as his column took its place on the right wing of the British position, Howe had arrived to tell him that an attack was to be made on the Americans' right flank and that he (Clinton) was to lead it.[115] This tallies perfectly with the account of proceedings in the deleted paragraph from the draft of Howe's narrative. It therefore seems clear that the attack that von Heister refused to make was actually the assault on Chatterton's Hill, not a full-scale assault on the main rebel lines. Moreover, by the time Clinton (with Cornwallis in tow) arrived at the British left flank, the assault was already underway. Clinton reported this with no hint of disapproval, but it seems possible, given the fact that Howe had personally visited Clinton to inform him of his plans (Clinton explicitly wrote: 'The instant I came to my ground with the right column, Sir William Howe came to me, informed me he had determined on attacking the enemy's right over the Bronx, and desiring me to lead the attack'[116]) that this was yet another instance of British troops launching an attack upon the rebels before receiving the official order to advance. The troops undertaking the assault, the 28th and 35th Regiments, supported by the 5th and 49th, were soon also supported by Hessian units, grenadiers crossing the Bronx and joining in the attack, so von Heister had presumably thought better of his decision. Units under Colonel Rall

[113] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[114] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 51-52.
[115] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XX, f. 29, Clinton memo on White Plains, 9 Feb. 1777.
[116] Ibid.

were also involved, apparently taking the initiative to seize another hill that threatened the flank of the Americans on Chatterton's Hill and attacking them from there.[117]

Clinton made an enigmatic comment in his note of the affair, suggesting that when he came upon the scene of battle and noticed that von Heister had stirred himself into action, his thoughts had turned to the dormant commission he held over the German general. (A dormant commission was one that only came into effect if a superior officer was killed or disabled. In this case, had Howe been incapacitated, von Heister would have been technically in overall command of the British army in America, and this obviously unsatisfactory arrangement would be sidestepped by Clinton having a dormant commission to place him above von Heister in rank).[118] Clinton made it clear that he had not considered invoking this commission to be a proper course of action, but the fact that he had even considered it can only be explained by his having knowledge that von Heister was in some way guilty of misconduct. Given that Howe explained in the deleted paragraph that he had informed Clinton of von Heister's dissent, there seems no doubt that this is the episode referred to.

The sequence of events is therefore mostly clear. Howe asked von Heister to launch an attack on Chatterton's Hill and von Heister refused. Howe then personally went to find Clinton and inform him of the Hessian general's dissent. By the time Howe and Clinton had returned to the left flank, an assault was underway, with both British and Hessian troops engaged. Although von Heister's refusal to order his men to attack was a serious incident, and one that would undoubtedly have shaken Howe's confidence in the man (which, as has been shown, was already low), it was not the direct cause of Howe's failure to launch a full-scale assault following the capture of

[117] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[118] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XX, f. 29, Clinton memo on White Plains, 9 Feb. 1777.

Chatterton's Hill. It is possible, therefore, that Howe removed this paragraph from his narrative because he knew it was not entirely fair and did not address the matter of the full-scale assault.

Even so, the implication was still clear in the final speech delivered to the House of Commons that it was the Hessians' fault that the main assault had not been launched, yet close analysis of the events following the storming of Chatterton's Hill does not offer evidence to support this. There was no mention of any intention to launch a full-scale attack on 28 October in Howe's report, nor did Clinton leave any comment suggesting that one was planned. The first assault mentioned in Howe's report, the one planned for 29 October, appears to have been deferred simply due to the Americans' strengthening their lines on the night following the action on Chatterton's Hill. Howe had believed the rebels were now so strongly posted that he called up reinforcements (the 4th Brigade and two battalions from the 6th), under Lord Percy, from the New York garrison.[119]

Clinton made no mention of this, moving straight on to deal with the plans for an attack on the morning of 31 October. With respect to this, he reported that Howe had asked him to reconnoitre the American lines on 30 October. Clinton's report was that the American position could be threatened by the possession of a 'bald hill'[120] on their right flank. He also suggested diversionary actions in the centre and the right (against the Americans' left flank). However, Clinton did not mention all the details of his report. In a memo partly in cipher (perhaps suggesting that he felt uncomfortable with the contents being easily accessible) he outlined a meeting with Howe on 30 October, at which he delivered an exhaustive list of reasons (covered in Chapter 1) why a full-scale assault on the rebel lines was inadvisable. Clinton

[119] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[120] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 52.

suggested that taking the bald hill might 'stir'[121] the Americans and Howe (at least according to Clinton) declared that he would be satisfied with that. Clinton was therefore suggesting a move almost exactly the same as that of 28 October, an attempt to put pressure on the American lines by seizing a piece of high ground on their flank, thus forcing them to retire. It was exactly the sort of limited warfare Howe had been employing repeatedly, but on this occasion it appears he wanted more. Despite his apparent assertion that he would be satisfied with stirring the rebels, Howe surprised Clinton in the night following their meeting with orders to prepare for an assault against the centre of the American lines the following morning. Clinton was taken aback, especially as Howe's plan included no provision for diversionary actions from either flank.[122]

Howe's frontal assault against the heart of the rebel lines never materialised, thanks to the bad weather of the night of 30/31 October. Howe reported that this led to the attack being postponed and then called off when the Americans withdrew to another position on the night of 1 November. (Clinton asserted that the attack was actually put in motion before it was discovered that the Americans had moved their lines.[123]) Whatever the exact sequence of events, the major question raised by this episode is how strongly Clinton objected to the frontal assault planned by Howe. In his 'official' version of events, the one contained in his narrative of the war and intended for public scrutiny, Clinton was careful not to mention his misgivings other than pointing out that he had recommended diversionary attacks to be made at the same time. Commenting on Howe having asked for his opinion on the advisability of continuing with the attack after heavy rains had started during the night of 30

[121] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 43, Clinton memo, 30 Oct. 1776.
[122] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 52-53.
[123] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776; Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 53.

October, he merely stated that the commander-in-chief was 'already possessed of my opinions with respect to the general expediency'[124], neglecting to mention that those opinions included a long list of reasons why he believed an assault should not be risked.[125]

Howe's decision

There seems to be no doubt that Howe had intended to launch a full-scale assault on the American lines at White Plains. Having first concentrated his forces against an isolated position on the Americans' right flank, he had decided to attack the American centre. Washington had offered battle once more, again hoping to force the British into a costly frontal assault, and Howe finally was willing to accept the invitation. The situation was different now, however. On Long Island, Howe had been free to act almost exactly as he saw fit. Two months later he had a garrison to maintain in New York, so that he faced Washington at White Plains on roughly equal terms, both men commanding around 13,000 men (in marked contrast to Howe's numerical superiority on Long Island).[126] This directly affected events, because when the rebels strengthened their lines on the night of 28 October, Howe did not feel that he had enough men to enact his planned offensive the following day. It took more than a day for reinforcements to arrive from New York City and by the time they arrived the weather had turned and forced Howe to postpone his attack once more.[127] As Howe pointed out in his narrative, it was inevitable that the number of men available for

[124] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 52-53.
[125] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 43, Clinton memo, 30 Oct. 1776.
[126] Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 91.
[127] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.

offensive operations would diminish as the requirements of garrisons for forts, towns and posts grew.[128]

Howe would not have been feeling pressure from home at the time. On 23 October, just five days before the battle, he had received a batch of letters from Germain from as early as 21 June. These letters mostly gave approbation for all of Howe's decisions and plans, with only two points that might have caused any disquiet. On 21 June, Germain had commented that he had heard nothing from Howe since his letter of 12 May, pointing out that several private persons had written in the meantime on such matters as the arrival of supply ships.[129] It is unlikely that Howe could have taken offence at such a mild chiding, but he was more likely to have noted Germain's insistence, in the same letter, that he should dismiss as many transport vessels as possible from the service as soon as the second Hessian division had been delivered to America, in order to cut the expense of the war.[130] This was subtle pressure, but pressure nonetheless. More pleasing to Howe would have been the news that Germain had taken on board his concerns over linking up with Carleton's army from the north. Germain enclosed a copy of a letter to Carleton in which the commander in Canada had been instructed to give his army over to Burgoyne and then return to Quebec. Burgoyne was then to place himself under Howe's command when the two armies joined on the Hudson.[131] Howe must have taken satisfaction from the fact that he would not face the possibility of losing overall command following a link-up with the northern army and it was also evidence that Germain still

[128] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 14.
[129] *Parliamentary History*, Vol. X, pp. 348-350, Germain to Howe, 21 Jun. 1776.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid., p. 352, Germain to Howe, 22 Aug. 1776; Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 60-63, Germain to Carleton, 26 Mar. 1777. The original letter to Carleton, a copy of which was included in Germain's letter of 22 August to Howe, did not reach Canada, although Howe would have been unaware of this. Details of its contents were noted in this letter of 26 March 1777.

had confidence in his abilities and concerns for his peace of mind. It is also notable, however, that this reassurance did nothing to persuade Howe to move up the Hudson towards Burgoyne.

In contrast to the comfortable state of affairs with Germain, Howe's relationship with Clinton was clearly under pressure, although it is not certain how aware Howe himself would have been at this time. As detailed in Chapter 1, by the time of the Battle of White Plains Clinton had started to write notes and letters laced with genuine disdain for his commanding officer. Conferences between the two men were becoming predictable: Howe would propose a course of action and Clinton would disagree. This certainly occurred on 1 October, when discussions over the landing at Throg's Neck took place. Clinton was dismissive of the choice of landing point, saying 'If you don't want to attack them [the rebels] you are too near; if you do want to attack them you are too far off'.[132] Clinton had also urged against any offensive move whatsoever at that point, believing that Howe should wait to hear from the northern army first. It is reasonable to assume that a similar difference of opinion marked an earlier conference regarding the landing at Kip's Bay on York Island. Although no memoranda of this conference exists (it was suggested by Howe on 14 September) a further note from Clinton from 15 September is full of scorn for Howe's plan, suggesting that the meeting had taken place. Although Clinton would almost certainly not have been so frank in a face-to-face chat with Howe, his disapproval of the plan was evidently so strong that it is unlikely he would not have expressed it and, most probably, offered an alternative plan.[133] Finally, the conference of 30 October had once more revealed the two men to have vastly differing opinions on how to

[132] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 30, Clinton's notes on a conference, 1 Oct. 1776.
[133] Ibid., f. 18, Howe to Clinton, 14 Sep. 1776; Ibid., f. 19, Clinton memo, 15 Sep. 1776.

proceed. Howe (at this stage) wished to be aggressive, while Clinton again urged caution.[134]

As predictable as these conferences were, the results were no less so. In each case (regarding Kip's Bay, Throg's Neck and White Plains) Howe ignored the advice of his second-in-command. Even if it is not possible to claim that Howe was becoming exasperated with Clinton's constant disagreements (there is no evidence to support this and Howe appears to have remained patient with Clinton throughout their working relationship) it is clear he did not particularly value his input on operations. Following the adoption of Clinton's plan for the Battle of Long Island (and following Clinton's flagrant disregard for Howe's orders not to press the attack onto the rebel lines at Brooklyn) Howe appears to have ignored his input on every occasion. Even Clinton's recommendation for diversionary actions by the British right and left flanks at White Plains was ignored.[135]

If Howe's relationship with Clinton was deteriorating, that with the Hessian general von Heister had not even enjoyed a honeymoon period. Following an inauspicious start, matters had worsened.[136] Howe had been peeved by von Heister's refusal to allow his men to dismantle the rebel lines at Brooklyn and appeared to engage in deliberate needling of the German general regarding his censure of a Jäger detachment (as covered in Chapter 2).[137] Howe therefore appears to have had little faith in the German general before White Plains, and he almost certainly had none whatsoever afterwards. Even if von Heister's refusal to attack proved to be only temporary (and this again raises the question of whether he had fully understood

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[134] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 43, Clinton memo, 30 Oct. 1776.
[135] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 52-53.
[136] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, p. 39, Howe to Germain, 13 Aug. 1776.
[137] Uhlendorf, *Revolution in America*, p. 46; Tustin, ed., *Diary of the American War*, pp. 9-10; WCL, *William Howe Orderly Book*, 24 Oct. 1776.

Howe; this was still almost a month before von Muenchhausen was appointed as a liaison between the two men) he had refused to comply with Howe's battle plan. As the Hessian contingent was such a sizeable part of his army, Howe must have been concerned at the thought that he might not be able to count on them.

Howe was therefore in a considerably different situation from that he had faced on Long Island. His army was becoming dispersed as the campaign continued, he was in constant disagreement with his second-in-command and he had no faith in the commander of the sizeable Hessian contingent. Having decided to launch an attack at White Plains he was faced by outright refusal to comply from von Heister and an unequivocal lack of enthusiasm from Clinton. Consider also the fact that he was facing an entrenched enemy of equal strength, in contrast to the huge superiority in numbers he had enjoyed on Long Island, and it is perhaps remarkable that Howe shrugged off all of these difficulties and decided to press on. Only the withdrawal of the Americans to stronger lines appears, finally, to have dissuaded him from attacking, but the lack of support from his two main subordinates must have been unsettling.

One final question remains regarding White Plains. It does not seem that von Heister's dissent was the reason behind the failure to launch a full-scale assault, yet the draft of Howe's narrative shows that he had originally intended to blame the German general explicitly. It is possible that Howe saw the Hessians as an easy target, a way to very cheaply deal with the controversy and move on. It is possible that his recollection of events (as seems to have been the case regarding Long Island) was not entirely accurate. In the two and a half years between the Battle of White Plains and the delivery of his narrative to the House of Commons, von Heister's dissent may have assumed greater significance in Howe's mind, but Cornwallis (in one of his few displays of unity with Howe during his testimony at the inquiry) also referred to the

'political reasons', going on to state to his inquisitor that 'I cannot satisfy the honourable gentleman's curiosity, but I will venture to assure him upon my honour, that if he knew the reasons he would be perfectly satisfied'.[138] Howe was lucky that Cornwallis had been present (and thus willing to testify on the matter during the inquiry) during the critical events at White Plains. The fact that Cornwallis went along with Howe's testimony in this instance is telling. If the Hessians were not merely scapegoats, then there may have been further disagreements with von Heister, although no evidence of this exists. The question of Howe's 'political reasons' has therefore only partly been resolved.

At White Plains, Howe revealed himself to be far more willing to engage the rebel army than has previously been credited. Far from always looking for an easy option, a way of manoeuvring the Americans from one position after another, he displayed a stubborn determination to bring the Americans to battle. Even in the face of a lack of cooperation from von Heister and constant disagreements from Clinton, he planned to attack Washington's army, persevering to the point of calling reinforcements from New York City and showing a willingness to continue with his plan for an attack even when bad weather intervened. Howe's testimony at his inquiry (yet again) confused the issue, indirectly placing the blame at the door of the Hessians. Howe's motives for doing this are unclear, but it does seem that he himself has been unfairly criticised for the failure to launch a full-scale attack. He was very shortly to prove that he was not as averse to such a course of action as has been suggested.

[138] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII, p. 16.

III: Fort Washington

The British assault on Fort Washington, on 16 November 1776, does not feature in the standard list of Howe's controversial decisions. He barely mentioned it during his narrative, it did not feature on Germain's list of points to consider for the inquiry and historians have been uniformly positive in their considerations of the battle.[139] This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the success of the assault on the fort. With so many hesitations and failures punctuating Howe's period in command, a well-conceived and well-executed attack with genuinely important consequences was always likely to escape serious scrutiny, and yet this was actually one of the most puzzling episodes in Howe's career, one that certainly justifies closer scrutiny.

Following the failure to bring Washington to battle at White Plains, Howe chose to break off his pursuit of the main rebel army and return to Manhattan, where Washington had left a sizeable garrison at Fort Washington. The Americans' confidence in their fort appears to have been unjustified. The fort and external works appeared strong enough (Johann Ewald was impressed when asked to reconnoitre the position on 14 November, noting that the area around the fort itself had been cleared of trees to the range of rifle fire, while ravines, woods, steep slopes and abbatis combined to make the approach to the fort extremely hazardous).[140] However, the garrison of 2,900 was much too small to hold all of the outer works, yet much too large for the fort alone. In addition to this, although well supplied with dried provisions, the fort had no well and water had to be brought up from the Hudson River.[141]

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[139] Black, *War for America*, p. 116; Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 93; Fortescue, *War of Independence*, pp. 44-46; O'Shaughnessy, *Men Who Lost America*, p. 96.
[140] Tustin, ed., *Diary of the American War*, p. 15.
[141] Walker, ed., *Engineers of Independence*, p. 142.

Much has been made of the fact that Howe received intelligence on the layout of Fort Washington prior to the attack (Anderson believed this was at the heart of Howe's 'political reasons' for refusing to divulge why he had not attacked at White Plains), but any knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of Fort Washington would surely have pointed out a siege as the least costly manner of forcing the garrison to surrender.[142] Washington was convinced that Howe would proceed with siege works, and was concerned that he might detach a corps to invade New Jersey at the same time. The American commander may also have touched on a pertinent point when he mentioned that Howe might have been feeling the pressure to achieve something important, writing: 'for what has he done as yet with his great army?'.[143]

Having given the garrison of Fort Washington the opportunity to surrender, on 15 November, Howe prepared a three-pronged attack, with the possibility of a fourth supporting assault if needed (*Figure 10*). This was a major undertaking, utilising both

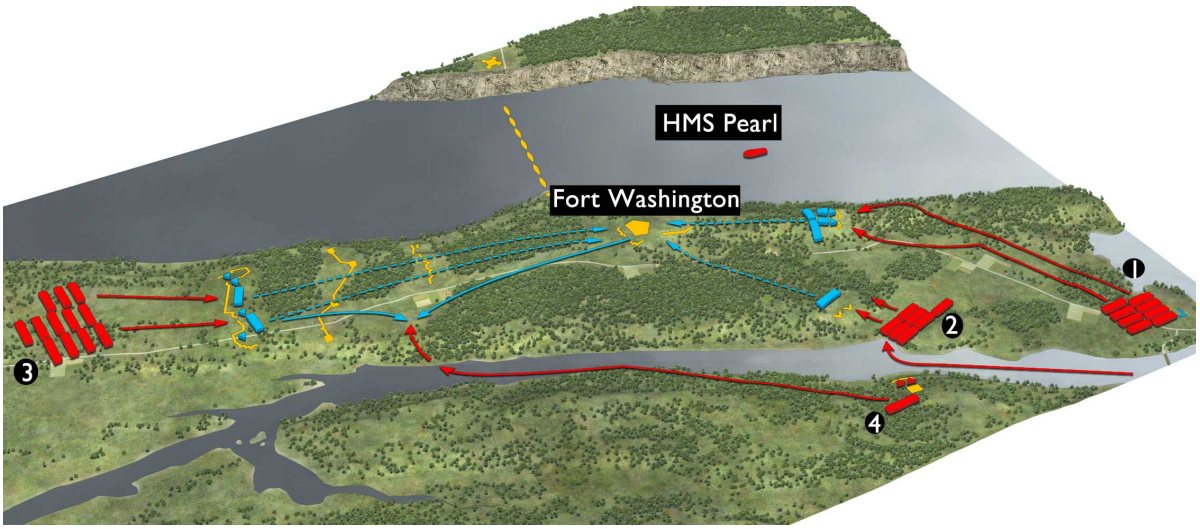

Figure 10: *Fort Washington, November 16, 1776*, in D. Smith & G. Turner, *New York 1776: The Continentals' First Battle* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2008), pp. 80-81.

[142] Uhlendorf, ed., *Revolution in America*, p. 68; Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, pp. 193-196.
[143] Ford, ed., *Writings*, Vol. V, pp. 7-8, Washington to Governor Livingston, 7 Nov. 1776.

Hessian and British forces. The three main attacks were carried out by Hessian troops under Lieutenant General von Knyphausen (marked '1' on *Figure 10*), British light infantry, guards, grenadiers and the 33rd Regiment under Cornwallis and Brigadier General Mathew (2) and a combined force of Hessian and British regiments under Lord Percy (3). The fourth force (initially intended to act as a diversion) comprised the 42nd Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel Stirling and two supporting battalions (4). *HMS Pearl* would offer support from a position on the Hudson, while further artillery support would come from a battery sited on the opposite bank of the East River from the American positions (also at 4).[144]

Von Knyphausen's Hessian force ran into the stiffest resistance. With a skirmishing line of Jägers, grenadiers and picked men in front, the twin columns came under heavy fire from woods in front of the American positions and also had to contend with steep hills and abbatis. Von Ewald described a four- or five-hour firefight before the rebels were driven back to the fort.[145] Cornwallis and Mathew landed their two light infantry battalions from 30 flat-bottomed boats and instantly stormed the American positions in front of them, driving them back quickly. The remainder of this corps was then landed and the whole advanced towards Fort Washington. Lord Percy made quick progress on the opposite flank and Howe decided to send in the 42nd Regiment to attempt to cut off the retreating Americans, which they did, capturing around 170 men in the process.[146] Hessian and British units then converged on Fort Washington, with Colonel Rall (who had attracted notice for his performance at White Plains) apparently taking his regiment as close as 30 paces.[147] There appears to have been some possibility of the Hessians, who had come

[144] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[145] Tustin, ed., *Diary of the American War*, p. 16.
[146] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[147] Uhlendorf, ed., *Revolution in America*, pp. 70-71.

under the heaviest fire during the attack, putting the garrison to the sword, but there was no massacre and the fort was quickly surrendered with a total loss of around 3,000 men (around 150 casualties, with the rest taken prisoner) and vast amounts of stores, armaments and ammunition.[148]

The controversy

Historians considering the fall of Fort Washington have generally concentrated on the lack of judgement shown by Washington in allowing the garrison to remain in place.[149] Washington realised that the fort was vulnerable and could serve no purpose in terms of blocking the Hudson to British shipping. 'I am therefore inclined to think,' he had written to Nathanael Greene, 'that it will not be prudent to hazard the men and stores at Mount Washington.'[150] Disastrously, he allowed Greene, as the commander on the spot, to make the final decision. By the time Washington arrived to inspect the situation, on 14 November, British forces were already gathering (von Knyphausen's Hessian brigade had commenced the build-up, taking up a position on the northern tip of Manhattan on 2 November).[151] It seems likely that Washington was mainly concerned with the possibility of evacuating the garrison following the inevitable siege. From his experiences on Long Island and at White Plains, there was no reason to suspect that Howe would mount an assault on a prepared defensive position.[152]

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[148] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[149] Mackesy, *War for America*, pp. 91-92. Mackesy viewed the Americans' defence of Fort Washington as part of an overall strategy that was characterized by 'weakness everywhere'; Griffith, *War for American Independence*, pp. 327-329. Griffith believed Forts Washington and Lee should both have been abandoned. Schecter, *Battle for New York*, pp. 244-245. Schecter believed Washington allowed himself to be swayed by the opinions of a trusted officer, Nathanael Greene.
[150] Ford, ed., *Writings*, Vol. V, p. 10, Washington to Major General Greene, 8 Nov. 1776.
[151] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[152] Ford, ed., *Writings*, Vol. V, p. 24, Washington to the President of Congress, 14 Nov. 1776.

Washington's leadership was indeed suspect on this occasion, but Howe's decision to attack appears uncharacteristically aggressive. In fact, it went against almost every principle he had espoused during the campaign up to that point. His letters to Germain, and his subsequent defence at the inquiry, were most notable for his repeated assertions that he would not attack prepared defences. It is especially interesting to consider the reasons he had given just two months previously for not attacking the very same lines that defended Fort Washington. On 25 September he had written to Germain claiming that the rebel defences on the Harlem Heights (the area around Fort Washington) were too strong to attack. His exact words were: 'The enemy is too strongly posted to be attacked in front, and innumerable difficulties are in our way of turning him on either side.'[153] As Howe's army took up positions around Fort Washington in November, they were facing a garrison of 3,000 rather than Washington's entire army, which would certainly have factored into Howe's decision. The second division of Hessians (4,000 men under von Knyphausen) had also recently arrived, and Howe had cited their absence as a reason for his pessimism over future operations in the letter to Germain of 25 September.[154]

The American positions around the Harlem Heights and Fort Washington were therefore undoubtedly more vulnerable, and the position could not be ignored as the garrison could threaten New York City with raids and possibly a major assault. Howe's stated reasons for assaulting it, however, simply did not make sense.

> Fort Washington… was covered by very strong ground, and exceeding difficult of access; but the importance of this post, which, with Fort Lee on the opposite shore of Jersey, kept the enemy in command of the navigation of the North River, while it barred the communication with York by land, made the possession of it absolutely necessary.[155]

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[153] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 283-284, Howe to Germain, 25 Sep. 1776.
[154] Ibid., ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776. Howe reported the second wave of Hessians (along with a regiment of Waldeckers) as arriving on 18 Oct.
[155] Ibid.

Fort Washington had proved inadequate to prevent British shipping from sailing up the Hudson in July, when the *Phoenix* and *Rose* had both cruised past, suffering only minor damage.[156] Since then, the addition of Fort Lee, on the New Jersey side of the Hudson, had also failed to close the river to the British, as made clear by the fact that the *Pearl*, took station above both forts on 16 November to support the assault. The flat-bottomed boats to be used in the attack, 30 of them, had also passed between the two forts under cover of darkness on the night of 14 November.[157] Washington realised perfectly well that the forts, along with the hulks and other sunken obstructions, had failed to close the river to the Royal Navy. The presence of the *Pearl* would have prevented the Americans from evacuating the garrison of Fort Washington by boat, and there was no other possible route of escape. Howe, apparently in possession of detailed plans of the fort, could therefore have invested the position and waited for their supplies to run out. As Washington realised, this would require only a portion of the army to accomplish, leaving the major part of Howe's force free to move into New Jersey.[158]

The decision to assault the works, rather than lay siege, is further called into question by the casualties Howe's army sustained in the attack. In his report to Germain he avoided putting a figure on the operation, although he did include ominous phrases such as 'his corps was for a considerable time exposed to the fire of three pieces of cannon', 'the light infantry moved, and landed under a brisk fire' and 'he immediately advanced his boats under a heavy fire'.[159] The casualties were severe, totalling 78 killed and 374 wounded.[160] Howe did include a tally of the American losses in his report, and they were far lower: 53 killed and 96 wounded,

[156] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 217-218, Howe to Germain, 8 Jul. 1776.
[157] Ibid., ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[158] Ford, ed., *Writings*, Vol. V, p. 10, Washington to Major General Greene, 8 Nov. 1776.
[159] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 294-302, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[160] Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 419.

although they also lost almost 2,900 prisoners. The total of British and Hessian losses was greater than those incurred at the Battle of Long Island (452 compared to 367)[161], yet only a small corps of Washington's army was engaged. An argument could certainly be made that 'the point to be carried was not adequate to the loss of men to be expected from the enterprise,'[162] Howe's own words in defence of his decision not to attack at White Plains.

Howe's decision

Howe must have been frustrated with the events at White Plains at the end of October; he had clearly intended to launch a full-scale assault on Washington's army. There is no documentary evidence of Howe's thoughts at this time, as we only have his dry letters to Germain to draw from, but it is possible to argue that the assault on Fort Washington was at least in part a reaction to this frustration. It is notable that neither von Heister nor Clinton took any part in the assault on Fort Washington. Clinton claimed to have been involved in the planning of the attack (in fact, he claimed that it was he who suggested the three-pronged assault). Furthermore, Clinton suggested that it was Howe's original intent to attack only with the Hessians under the newly arrived von Knyphausen.[163]

Clinton had been given command of the planned descent upon Rhode Island, but he was not to leave until early December and could theoretically have played a more active part in the attack on Fort Washington.[164] He had led the flanking column on Long Island, the landings at Kip's Bay and Throg's Neck and had been selected by Howe to lead the assault on Chatterton's Hill after von Heister had refused to do so.

[161] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776. Casualties for Long island are taken from Howe's report to Germain.
[162] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 7.
[163] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 54.
[164] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.

Since then, as well as revealing his reluctance to attack the Americans at White Plains, Clinton had also made his bad-tempered comment on preferring to command three companies rather than serve under Howe in a bigger force (this comment was made during the withdrawal from White Plains). It is not certain when Cornwallis (who overheard the comment) informed Howe, but it is known that the British commander learned of the outburst, as it came up in one of the conferences between the two generals the following year. If the news had reached Howe's ears before the attack on Fort Washington, it might have affected his opinion of Clinton.[165]

Washington's comment, that Howe might have been feeling pressure to do something with his army, may have merit, but the British commander was still operating with the support of his political master, Lord Germain. No new letters had arrived from home since those he had received on 23 October (detailed in the section on White Plains). The only substantial change in his circumstances were in his relationships with von Heister and Clinton.

The casualties suffered at White Plains (214 for the British and 99 for the Hessians), coupled with the returns from the Battle of Long Island (318 killed and wounded for the British, 28 for the Hessians) raise a further point.[166] It is possible that Howe felt the Hessians were not shouldering their fair share of the burden in the campaign. In addition, although the skirmishing in the Battle of Harlem Heights on 16 September had not been an authorised action, it had still been an expensive one and the 168 casualties suffered were mainly borne by the British.[167] In this context, von Heister's refusal to attack at White Plains would certainly have been troubling, and

[165] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, Memo of conversation with William Howe, 6 Jul. 1777: f. 26.
[166] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.
[167] Ibid., ff. 274-276, Howe to Germain, 21 Sep. 1776; Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, p. 419.

Clinton's claim that the attack on Fort Washington had originally been intended to be a Hessian-only affair takes on added significance in this light.

Although Howe's performance on Long Island confirmed his inherently cautious nature, White Plains showed that he was capable of being more aggressive than he is generally conceived to have been. Fort Washington reinforced this impression and, viewed in context along with the new perspective on his decision-making at White Plains, it is clear that Howe recognised the importance of engaging the rebel army, rather than merely occupying territory. It is also possible to see, in a man who admitted to having a temper, especially on the battlefield, a flash of frustration that his plans at White Plains had been undermined by subordinates and circumstances alike. At Fort Washington, where an isolated and vulnerable garrison was certain to be taken 'at a very cheap rate, by regular approaches,'[168] Howe instead chose to mount the most aggressive action of his entire period in command of the British army.

IV: Howe's strategy for 1776

Whether or not Howe had a clear strategy in mind during the 1776 campaign is a major question when attempting to understand his period in command. Having considered in detail three of the most important tactical decisions made by Howe during this campaign, a consideration of his strategic thinking is necessary to see if he was consistently working towards a fully articulated plan. The concept of strategy has been defined in many ways, and it has been claimed that it barely existed (at least on a

[168] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 257-260, Howe to Germain, 3 Sep. 1776.

conscious level, in the minds of commanders) before the nineteenth century.[169] For the purposes of this assessment it will be considered to be the process by which campaign targets were set, never losing sight of the goals they were intended to achieve. Under this interpretation, the intention to capture Philadelphia in 1777 would not be considered strategic, but the intention to foster greater support from the loyalist community in Pennsylvania *through* the capture of Philadelphia, would. It must also be remembered that Howe was operating in what van Creveld considered to be the 'stone age' of military command systems. In fact, van Creveld argued that the general absence of a concept of strategy was due in large part to the inability of commanders to exert sufficient strategic control of an army. He did, however, accept that certain strategic principles still applied (including the decision to wage an offensive or defensive war and the choice of battleground), whether anyone was consciously considering them as 'strategy' or not. Equally important was the move away from rulers of states commanding their own armies, which introduced the need for correspondence between the ruling entity at home and the commander in the field.[170] With 3,000 miles of the Atlantic Ocean between Howe and Britain, this was no small matter.

It has generally been assumed that Howe was following the Hudson strategy (the linking up of two armies on the Hudson River), as outlined in his agenda-setting letter of June 1775, and it is common for works on the war to cite this as the underlying British strategy.[171] Samuel B. Griffith II wrote of the 'almost hypnotic influence'[172] the concept had on British generals including Gage, Carleton, Clinton, Burgoyne and Howe, as well as Germain. Anderson wrote of the near unanimous

[169] M. van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 18.
[170] Van Creveld, *Command in War*, pp. 18 & 57.
[171] SRO, Dartmouth Manuscripts, William Howe to Lord Howe, 12 Jun. 1775.
[172] Griffith, *War for American Independence*, p. 365.

support for operations along the Hudson, alluding to a form of institutional memory regarding the importance of the river during the French and Indian War.[173] Gruber noted that the strategy was apparently accepted by all the leading players in the British war effort and was aimed at ending the rebellion in a single campaign.[174] Mackesy also noted the near inevitability of the Hudson assuming a prominent role in the planning for 1776, noting that it 'thrust like a highway into the heart of the rebel country'.[175]

Even if it was the case that Howe followed this strategy (and, as shall be shown, this is highly doubtful) assuming control of the Hudson was not an end in itself, it was just the starting point of a plan to isolate and launch raids into the New England colonies. Even to reach that starting point required supporting elements. A base needed to be established at New York City, loyalist forces needed to be raised to act alongside the British and the destruction of the rebel army under George Washington was also a requisite, or any post along the Hudson could be targeted by an overwhelming force and captured.[176]

The controversy

Although the loss of Trenton ended the 1776 campaign on a distinctly sour note, the year was not considered to have been wasted and there was a general sense that Howe had taken a solid first step towards ending the rebellion. Driving the Americans out of New York had been skilfully achieved, with fewer losses than might have been expected, and the Hudson was now open for Howe to meet up with the northern army. The subsequent failures of the 1777 campaign (the absence of a decisive battle against

[173] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, pp. 108-113.
[174] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, pp. 82-83.
[175] Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 42.
[176] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 8, Clinton to General Harvey and Duke of Newcastle (draft), 15 Nov. 1775.

Washington and the loss of Burgoyne's entire army at Saratoga) prompted a closer look at the 1776 campaign, and it started to appear as a series of missed opportunities. Even then, and with the benefit of hindsight, Germain initially had no major complaints with the progress of the campaign until Howe failed to attack the rebels at White Plains.[177] The closer the scrutiny, however, the more apparent flaws came to light and, by the time the inquiry opened, Howe found himself under attack for his actions throughout the campaign, including halting his assaulting troops on Long Island, opting to take the rebel lines by siege and failing to take advantage of the undoubted inferiority of the rebel army at that early stage of the war.[178]

Some of the most violent criticism of Howe came in the pamphlets written mainly by Joseph Galloway and Israel Mauduit. Galloway wrote of the 'want of wisdom in the plans'[179] when considering Howe's generalship, while Mauduit asserted that he had been 'baffled and defeated in all his attempts, and out-generaled even by a man that was none'.[180] More considered appraisals still usually found Howe wanting and widely differing conclusions have been drawn by historians. Maldwyn Jones believed Howe had no clear plan of operations in mind and that consequently there was no coherence in his movements.[181] Gruber made the important point that tactical considerations were of more interest to generals at the time and that none of the commanders in charge had experience in formulating strategy.[182] In Gruber's detailed analysis of the Howe brothers' command during the war, he contested that although Howe had played an active role in the planning for the 1776 campaign, he

[177] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 89-90, 'Hints for the management of an intended enquiry', 1777 or 1778.
[178] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII (1802), pp. 8-9 (Cornwallis' testimony), pp. 55-56 (Montresor) & p. 277 (Robertson).
[179] Galloway, *Letters to a Nobleman*, p. 36.
[180] Mauduit, *Strictures on the Philadelphia Mischianza*, p. 6.
[181] Jones, 'Sir William Howe' in *George Washington's Generals and Opponents*, ed. Billias, p. 64.
[182] Ibid., pp. 38-39.

had deliberately changed his strategy prior to the Battle of Long Island, aiming instead merely to regain territory, drive the Americans out of New York and look to end the war the following year. Gruber was unable to pinpoint the reasons for such a change of heart, although he believed it stemmed from a desire to promote reconciliation with the colonies.[183] Bicheno discounted the idea that a search for a decisive battle had ever been a genuine part of Howe's plan, praising instead the 'very nearly successful strategy of alternating sharp military action with political concessions'.[184] He also asserted that a more ruthless prosecution of the war would have suppressed the revolution, even if the suppression had proved to be temporary.[185] Black saw faults with the Hudson strategy, but still believed a more dynamic general could have implemented it successfully.[186]

The question remains whether Howe had attempted to follow the Hudson strategy, a different one, or none at all. Adding to the impression that this was a rudderless campaign, Howe's actions during 1776 sometimes appear to have been contradictory (storming the lines around Fort Washington while insisting on siege works for those on Long Island, for instance) and, as has been shown in preceding chapters, his own explanations of his conduct often added more layers of complexity and confusion. This does not necessarily mean there was no underpinning strategic aim. Circumstances could change from day to day and Howe's own opinions on what might be achievable would have been influenced by factors including the movements of the rebel army, the opinions of his fellow officers and even the weather (the severe downpour at White Plains being a case in point). The benefit of hindsight, and also a fairly comprehensive knowledge of the strength of rebel positions at various times

[183] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, pp. 82, 83 & 105-106.
[184] Bicheno, *Rebels and Redcoats*, p. xxxi.
[185] Ibid., pp. xxviii-xxix.
[186] Black, *War for America*, p. 98.

during the year, colour our understanding of events and make it tempting to claim that Howe had never intended to fight a decisive battle. The traditional sequence of events shows him snubbing apparent opportunities at Long Island and White Plains, while refusing even to attempt an action against Washington's lines at the Harlem Heights in September. A beguiling picture emerges of Howe refusing to engage the rebels despite their offering battle on frequent occasions.

Howe's correspondence with Germain (detailed in Chapter 3) included many assertions that a decisive victory was desirable, usually accompanied by a list of problems that would make it difficult to gain one. The strategy he articulated for 1776 initially called for a quick relocation from Boston to New York (before the Americans could fortify it). Howe also wished to receive his reinforcements in the spring to give him as much time as possible to embark upon the job of destroying the rebel army and moving a force up the Hudson.[187] This appears to have been an indication that he intended to follow the Hudson strategy, but by April 1776 it was clear this was not going to happen. Howe had been unable to extricate himself from Boston as early as he had planned and the raising of troops was proving problematic, causing Howe to express doubts that he could bring the rebels to a decisive battle.[188] His concerns that Washington would fortify New York and act on the defensive proved prophetic and Howe's orders for the Battle of Long Island, which went only so far as to outflank and drive back the outer line of defences along the Gowanus Heights, as well as his decision to take the lines by siege rather than by assault, are strong evidence that he had no intention of looking for a decisive action there.[189] Subsequent events suggest that he was not looking for a decisive battle on Manhattan either. The landing point chosen (Kip's Bay) allowed the 5,000-strong rebel garrison to evacuate the city,

[187] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 311-316, Howe to Dartmouth, 9 Oct. 1775.
[188] Ibid., ff. 139-143, Howe to Germain, 25 Apr. 1776.
[189] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 43.

rather than penning it in and forcing it to fight or surrender. Howe then refused to assault defensive lines at the Harlem Heights, instead forcing Washington to evacuate those positions by landing in his rear. From this point, however, Howe's mode of proceeding changed. Once the Americans had been manoeuvred out of the defensive works they had been able to prepare around New York, and forced to take up improvised positions at White Plains, he became more aggressive. At White Plains it seems clear that he fully intended to launch a major assault, while at Fort Washington he attacked the lines that had previously daunted him around the Harlem Heights (partly, no doubt, because they were then guarded by a fraction of the men who had held them two months previously). Howe's thinking during this stage of the campaign now becomes clearer. As Charles Lee had said when reconnoitring New York earlier in the year, the best policy for the Americans was to construct rank upon rank of defensive works and force the British to pay a steep price to shift them.[190] Howe seems to have appreciated that this would be their strategy and had no intention of obliging them, but after forcing them to leave the safety of those lines, he was willing to pursue a major engagement.

A passage in the draft of Howe's narrative supports this. In dealing with preparations for shifting the rebels from Manhattan, Howe's finalised speech referred to the fact that, during the pause in operations following the landing at Kip's Bay, he had been gathering intelligence on the country beyond Manhattan, saying: 'some time was also necessarily employed in enquiries respecting the face of the country to be possessed upon a supposition that the enemy should remove from Kingsbridge'.[191] The draft shows that he had originally planned to say: 'some time was also necessarily employed in enquiries respecting the face of the country to be possessed

[190] Walker, ed., *Engineers of Independence*, pp. 114-116.
[191] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 5-6.

for the removal of the enemy from Kingsbridge and to bring them to action deprived of the defence of their strong works there'.[192] Why Howe chose to change this is uncertain. The draft version hints once more at being unwilling to face the enemy on ground of their choosing and Howe may have felt that the speech as a whole was making this assertion too frequently. However, the draft version was far less passive, suggesting that he was acting according to a formulated plan. It also appears to have been an accurate portrayal of his actions at the time. Howe did force the rebels to leave their lines on Manhattan and he was able to bring them to battle in hastily prepared positions, at White Plains.

There were no further opportunities to engage Washington's army following the capture of the isolated garrison at Fort Washington. Having captured Fort Lee, on the opposite bank of the Hudson, on 20 November, a British corps under Cornwallis chased Washington's army through New Jersey, eventually halting at the Delaware River.[193] The pursuit of Washington's army was not without its own controversy. Cornwallis, ditching baggage to enable his men to move quickly, appeared on the verge of capturing the fleeing rebels, reckoned to number as few as 3,000 by this point (a further corps of around 3,500 was with Charles Lee), only to stop, according to their orders, at Brunswick.[194] Once more, a British force in full cry had been halted by the orders of Howe. Whereas Clinton had been willing to disregard such orders on Long Island, Cornwallis obeyed Howe's command. This strongly supports the assertion that Howe was no longer looking to engage the rebel army, but had switched to a policy of territorial acquisition (exactly the shift in strategy that Gruber suggested, although it appears to have taken place later than Gruber estimated).

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[192] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 12 (my emphasis).
[193] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776. Howe stated here that the capture of Fort Lee took place on 18 November, but the consensus is that it was 20 November.
[194] Ibid., CO 5/94, ff. 16-18, Howe to Germain, 20 Dec. 1776.

As well as restoring British authority to large swathes of the colonies, such territorial acquisition would encourage loyalists to enlist in provincial corps, a key consideration if British rule was to be restored. Howe later defended his decision to occupy New Jersey by referring to his belief at the time that there were large numbers of loyalists in the area, and that they could not fail to notice the difference between British and rebel authority.[195] The anticipation of loyalist support in the colonies was to be a recurrent theme. It had already been the idea behind Clinton's disastrous southern expedition and would continue to influence Howe's planning in 1777. It had proved to be chimerical by the time Germain wrote to Clinton in March 1778, suggesting that large bands of loyalists would join the cause if operations were moved to the south, but in 1776 it was still a reasonable supposition to act upon.[196] Both Clinton and Howe agreed (one of the few points on which they seem to have shared the same opinion) that peace could only be brought to the colonies if the loyalist element could be effectively employed. Clinton's view was that the Hudson strategy itself could not hope to succeed without significant loyalist support in the region.[197]

The decisive defeat of Washington's army and the fostering of loyalist support were supposedly only complementary elements to the keystone of the strategy for 1776, the linking up of two armies along the Hudson. Howe's doubts over this were detailed in Chapter 3, but even when Germain had acted to reassure him that he would not lose control over his army following the junction (by appointing Burgoyne to command the northern army), Howe still made no move up the Hudson.[198] Conversations with Clinton had demonstrated that Howe did not consider the strategy to be essential, arguing that the British could continue the war effort solely from New

[195] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 7-9.
[196] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXXI, f. 48, Germain to Clinton, 8 Mar. 1778.
[197] Ibid., Vol. XVIII, Memo of meeting with Howe, Nov. 1776.
[198] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, pp. 60-63, Germain to Carleton, 26 Mar. 1777.

York if the rebels successfully captured Quebec.[199] The full impact of Howe's lack of commitment to this strategy would not be felt until the following year, but it was clear by December 1776 that it was not playing a part in his plans for that campaign. Whether Howe had ever intended to begin a move up the Hudson is unknown. It is possible that, had he destroyed Washington's army at White Plains, he might have then moved on the Hudson Highlands to facilitate a move up the river either at the end of 1776, or early in the following campaign. His ambitious plan of November 1776 included a corps to operate on the Hudson (and a sizeable one at that, numbering 10,000), but this was the first element of his proposed strategy for 1777 to be downscaled and eventually discarded in the revised plans that quickly followed and in the greatly curtailed plan he formulated in response to his limited reinforcements.[200] It therefore seems more likely that Howe had little faith in the strategy and a passage in the draft of his narrative suggests he may even have fundamentally misunderstood its purpose. Musing on the fact that the northern army was attempting to reach Albany, he suggested that it might have been transferred to New York City and then made its way to Albany 'by a more ready route'. 'We should, I think,' Howe continued, 'by that means, have possessed ourselves of the province of New York, which was the view of the other plan.'[201] Moving from New York City to Albany would only have established control over approximately half the length of the Hudson, and would not have cut off the middle colonies from the New England colonies, which was the actual aim of the Hudson strategy. Howe, perhaps wisely, omitted this section from his final speech, as was the case with a further illuminating passage that followed immediately afterwards, in which he wrote:

[199] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, Memo of conversation with General Howe, 3 Dec. 1775
[200] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[201] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, ff. 62-63.

> Gentlemen may perhaps ask, why I did not propose this measure to the minister? I answer, because I did not consider myself in any degree called upon to do it – a senior and more experienced officer commanded in Canada. He was much more competent than I to judge and advise… besides, ever considering the Northern Expedition as a measure determined by government, to have obtruded my objections might not only have been deemed an officious impertinence, but would have carried the appearance of my seeking to have the whole American army immediately placed under my command – a scruple of delicacy which I confess had weight with me at the time.[202]

Had both of these passages been left in the speech delivered to the House of Commons, no one could have had any doubt that Howe felt the Hudson strategy was, effectively, none of his business. It was an entirely separate operation, ordered by government and entrusted to a completely independent corps of the British army in North America. He felt no obligation to it and did not even comprehend its actual purpose. Van Creveld noted, in a list of the prerequisites for an (unattainable) perfect command system, the need for a commander to be offered alternative strategies that were 'real, not just subterfuges presented as a matter of form.'[203] It is enlightening to consider the initial list of alternatives presented to Gage, by Lord Dartmouth, back in August 1775, in which the Hudson strategy was clearly presented as the favoured option. The discretion offered to Gage was illusory and Howe may have felt that he was bound to pay lip service at least to the following of this strategy.[204]

One final element in Howe's planning for 1776 deserves consideration. A general needs to make full use of any advantage he has over an opponent and, in the fleet commanded by his brother, Howe had a very telling advantage indeed over Washington. Howe made this pay by almost exclusively moving his army by means of Lord Howe's transports. The Howe brothers cooperated on operations that saw large bodies of men landed safely at Staten Island, Long Island, Kip's Bay, Throg's

[202] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, ff. 62-63.
[203] Van Creveld, *Command in War*, p. 8.
[204] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/92, ff. 200-206, Dartmouth to Gage, 2 Aug. 1775.

Neck and Pell's Point. None of these movements were effectively countered by Washington (with the exception of Throg's Neck, where the progress of the British was frustrated as much by the unexpected nature of the area chosen for the landing as it was by enemy action). Indeed, the American general spent most of the 1776 campaign in an agony of indecision over where Howe's army might move next.[205] While it could certainly be argued that Howe may have made more imaginative use of this facility (Clinton frequently pressed for a landing further in the Americans' rear to trap their entire army)[206] it offered a way to force Washington to abandon strong defences without taking the inevitable casualties that would follow an assault. The importance of close naval support was probably paramount in Howe's thinking when he agreed to a proposal from his brother to seize Rhode Island (first suggested at the end of the preceding year), which offered a safe winter harbour for the fleet.[207] The detachment of 6,000 men to effect this, under the command of Clinton, reduced Howe's capacity to act offensively at the end of the 1776 campaign (Clinton again disagreed, favouring a move to take Philadelphia instead), but given the needs of the fleet, it was probably an unavoidable course of action.[208]

Howe's decision

Howe seems to have followed a strategy in 1776 that was more coherent and realistic than he is generally credited with, but it is not clear that he followed the same strategy throughout the campaign. It is possible that he intended first to deal with

[205] Ford, ed., *Writings*, Vol. IV, pp. 360-361, Washington to Major-General Heath, 22 Aug. 1776; Ibid., pp. 377-378, Washington to Heath, 1 Sep. 1776; Ibid., pp. 385-388, Washington to the President of congress, 6 Sep. 1776; Ibid., pp. 452-454, Howe to Brigadier-General Mercer, 26 Sep. 1776; Ibid., pp. 496-500, Washington to Governor Trumbull, 15 Oct. 1776.
[206] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 40; WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XVIII, f. 19 Memo, 15 Sep. 1776; Ibid., Vol. XVIII, f. 30, Clinton's notes on a conference, 1 Oct. 1776.
[207] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XII, f. 19, Conversation with General Howe, 3 Dec. 1775.
[208] Ibid., Vol. XVIII, f. 55, Clinton to Edward Harvey, 26 Nov-1 Dec. 1776.

Washington's army and then occupy territory to foster loyalist support. It is equally possible that it was only when he had failed to destroy the rebel army that he switched strategies to one of reoccupation. His correspondence on the subject does not allow a definitive conclusion to be drawn. It seems apparent that he was initially looking for a decisive battle, but not one to be fought on the Americans' terms. It took time to manoeuvre them out of their prepared defences around New York, but once that had been accomplished he showed himself willing to engage Washington's army. By the end of the campaign (possibly feeling that the rebel army was a spent force), territorial acquisition had achieved primacy in his thinking, but this was not territorial acquisition for its own sake. Its purpose was the fostering of loyalist support, something that was accepted as critical if the British war effort was to be successful. Knowledge of the continued failure throughout the war to harness such support is not a valid basis on which to criticise Howe's strategy at this early point in the war.

Howe does deserve criticism, however, for his failure to grasp the fundamental principles of the Hudson strategy. This was at best a minor consideration in his operations for 1776 and may not have been on his agenda at all. This is remarkable considering it was the established British strategy for the war, one he had officially supported and one in which another British army was actively engaged. Due to the failure of the northern army under Carleton to make much headway in 1776, this glaring weakness in the overall British war effort was not apparent. In the following campaign, with the more vigorous Burgoyne at its head, the northern army would make rapid progress and the flaw would be fully, and fatally, exposed.

V: Howe's strategy for 1777

Although it is tempting to consider the 1777 campaign as one with no coherent strategy, that would not be entirely fair to Howe. It is true that, as it unfolded, it was deserving of the harsh criticism that has been levelled at it. Willcox called Howe's final plan 'a strategic cul-de-sac,'[209] while Clinton claimed that no other officer except Cornwallis agreed with Howe's decision to mount a seaborne offensive against Philadelphia rather than cooperating with Burgoyne's northern army.[210] It remains the case, however, that Howe first submitted a coherent, bold and potentially devastating plan for the 1777 campaign. At the time he committed this plan to paper, at the end of November, he had witnessed rebel resistance crumble. The failure to mount the all-out attack at White Plains may have still rankled, but the overwhelming success at Fort Washington, the subsequent capture of Fort Lee with its huge amount of supplies, and the headlong retreat of the remains of Washington's army must have been satisfying. Although recognising that a further campaign would be needed, Howe had firm ideas on the form that campaign should take. As well as cooperating in the Hudson strategy (perhaps a curious inclusion, given his apparent failure to understand its purpose) Howe wanted to expand the war into New England and Pennsylvania, potentially overwhelming the Americans.[211]

The controversy

The 1777 campaign could actually have been considered a success, if the narrow goals set by Howe were the only criteria by which it was judged. Philadelphia was taken and, in his speech to the House, Howe claimed his plans had been 'carried into execution with as little deviation, as, from the nature of military operations, could

[209] Willcox, 'Too Many Cooks', p. 62.
[210] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. CXXXVI, f. 12, Clinton notes (undated).
[211] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.

have been expected'.[212] The draft of the narrative shows that he had originally planned to say: 'That I had succeeded in my plans, as far as the nature of military transactions might warrant'.[213] Howe, wisely, seems to have realised that this would have been claiming too much, because the plans he had 'succeeded' in were, in many peoples' eyes, largely responsible for the loss of an army at Saratoga. The plans were also very different from those outlined in his letter to Germain of 30 November.[214] Howe, denied the extensive reinforcement he had requested, had concentrated his entire offensive force on Philadelphia, travelling there by sea, and had completely absolved himself of any responsibility for cooperating with Burgoyne's move down the Hudson. The only support for Burgoyne had come in the form of the well-executed capture of rebel forts in the Hudson Highlands, undertaken by Clinton on his own initiative.[215] The subsequent surrender of Burgoyne at Saratoga led directly to French involvement in the war, arguably ending any chance Britain had of regaining control over her former colonies.

Such a monumental failure inevitably meant there was plenty of blame to be shared out. Burgoyne, Howe and Germain were held culpable in fairly equal measure. The total lack of coordination between the two armies was the most damning piece of evidence and, depending on the political viewpoint of the accuser, could be used against any of the three principal characters. The political opponents of the North administration inevitably chose to blame Germain, for failing to support the generals in America and also for not ensuring a coherent strategy was followed.[216] Germain and North, concerned over the weakness of the administration and wanting the whole

[212] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 2.
[213] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 4.
[214] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[215] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 74-77.
[216] W. Cobbet, ed., *The Parliamentary History of England*, Vol. XX (7 Dec. 1778 to 10 Feb. 1780) (London: T. C. Hansard, 1814), p. 752

matter to be swept aside as quietly as possible, repeatedly claimed that they were blaming nobody, while the Howes and Burgoyne demanded the opportunity to explain their conduct in front of the House.[217]

Howe's original plan for 1777 did not survive long. Less than a month after he had outlined his plans to Germain, they had begun to unravel. As detailed in Chapter 3, even before the Hessian garrison was surprised and captured at Trenton (25 December 1776) and long before the receipt of Germain's disappointing letter regarding the number of reinforcements to be expected (9 March 1777) Howe had modified his initial plan, subordinating the move up the Hudson to an earlier strike against Philadelphia. His reason, the belief that there was a significant number of loyalists in Pennsylvania, clearly showed that the fostering of loyalist support was now his primary goal.[218] After Trenton, when he submitted his third plan (claiming that even more reinforcements were now needed), the extra 5,000 men he requested were also to be used against Philadelphia. The offensive corps on the Hudson would still operate under this revised plan (assuming Germain could find 20,000 reinforcements), but even with this massive augmentation of his force, it would remain of secondary importance.[219]

Howe's lack of commitment to the Hudson strategy was demonstrated in the consideration of his planning for 1776. His willingness to downscale and then completely remove it from his 1777 strategy underlines the fact, but it still leaves the question of what strategy Howe was pursuing. His reaction to Germain's inability to provide the large number of reinforcements he had requested requires careful analysis. It is clear that Howe felt personally affronted by the way Germain had tried to fudge the numbers, but it also seems likely that he had little faith in his plan

[217] Ibid., pp. 710, 712, 720-721 & 728.
[218] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 371-372, Howe to Germain, 20 Dec. 1776.
[219] Ibid., pp. 377-378, Howe to Germain, 20 Jan. 1777.

working if scaled down too drastically. It is easy to overlook the fact that his revised plan (submitted on 20 December 1776), was only intended to be a stopgap, a means of proceeding until the 15,000 reinforcements arrived. It was not intended to operate as a standalone plan, shorn of the support from corps at Rhode Island and New York. Germain appears to have grasped at this plan gratefully (possibly for the simple reason that it required no reinforcements), offering the praise that Howe's reasoning behind it was 'solid and decisive'[220] and perhaps not fully comprehending that it was just a different way of approaching the campaign. Howe still wanted the extensive reinforcements originally asked for to put his full plan into motion.

The principal reason for choosing to move on Philadelphia at the start of the campaign rather than the end (as originally envisaged) was that Pennsylvania seemed ready to return to obedience. The possession of Philadelphia, the seat of Congress and the largest city in America at the time, would, in Howe's opinion, encourage this. Howe also made the curious assertion that the rebels' main army would be based near Philadelphia, suggesting that he needed to go there if he was to attempt to bring them to battle, but Washington was not tied to Pennsylvania. His movements would depend on Howe's.[221] Howe himself made this clear when attempting to defend his decision during the inquiry, claiming that 'wherever the main body of our army had gone, there most assuredly would General Washington have gone also'.[222] By moving on Philadelphia, Howe also claimed to have drawn Washington away from the Hudson and, therefore, to have made the best diversion possible in aid of Burgoyne's progress.[223] Howe actually went further than this, claiming that using his main force on the Hudson would have been a waste of the campaign and would have certainly

[220] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 106-109, Germain to Howe, 3 Mar. 1777.
[221] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 371-372, Howe to Germain, 20 Dec. 1776.
[222] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 18.
[223] Ibid., p. 21.

taken so much time that no move on Philadelphia would have been possible that year, an argument that depended on everyone sharing his opinion of the importance of taking Philadelphia.[224]

The defence of his decision to invade Pennsylvania by sea, rather than by crossing the Delaware River, was similarly weak. In his initial reply to Germain he commented only on the difficulties and delay that would result from marching his army through New Jersey to cross the Delaware.[225] In his narrative he claimed to have had insufficient means to cross the Delaware, but this appears a desperate excuse when it is considered that Washington crossed the same river to escape Howe's pursuing army at the end of 1776 and successfully crossed it again to capture Trenton.[226] The idea that crossing the river would have delayed the campaign is perhaps best considered in light of the fact that, having written to Germain on that point on 2 April, it was 23 July before his army left New York to approach Philadelphia by sea, and it was 27 August before it disembarked at the Head of Elk. The city was not taken until 26 September.[227]

Consideration of the situation Howe found himself in at the end of 1776 sheds light on his thinking. His relationship with von Heister was now irreparably fractured. The Hessian general's dissent at White Plains led Howe to believe he could no longer work with him and he asked for his recall on 26 December 1776.[228] The situation with Clinton was more complex (depending on when Howe heard of his outburst on the withdrawal from White Plains), but it is possible that Howe was also aware of the

[224] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 20-21.
[225] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.
[226] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 16.
[227] WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers, Cliffe to Jack Cliffe, 24 Oct. 1777; Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 26; *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 424-430, Howe to Germain, 10 Oct. 1777.
[228] Lomas, ed., *Manuscripts of Mrs Stopford-Sackville*, Vol. II, p. 54, Howe to Germain, 31 Dec. 1776.

breakdown of this relationship (although even had that been the case, Clinton would soon be on his way to Rhode Island).[229] Despite these important considerations, Howe apparently remained committed to the war effort, outlining his multi-faceted plan for 1777. He even felt able to predict that this plan would end the war in the following year, an uncharacteristic burst of optimism. Two factors might have served to counter the negative influences of his relationships with von Heister and Clinton. Firstly, Howe's army had improved with the benefit of a little experience. The attack on Fort Washington had demonstrated clearly what his men (British and Hessian alike) could achieve when working together. Secondly, he still enjoyed the confidence of Germain. Before the year ended, and before the setback at Trenton, Howe received a bundle of letters, dated 18 October, in which he was lavishly praised for his performance on Long Island and rewarded with a knighthood.[230]

When (in his eyes) that confidence was withdrawn, the effect on Howe was devastating. He gave himself almost a full month before replying to Germain's letter, yet even then the bitterness and disappointment were clear as he systematically dismantled the entire 1777 plan. It is not possible to know what Howe would have done with the 7,800 reinforcements he had originally been promised by Germain.[231] Howe had suggested that the offensive into New England, from Rhode Island, would have been reinstated before any move up the Hudson, but even this might have put a very different spin on the 1777 campaign, by giving the Americans three offensives to cope with instead of just two. In the event, Germain quickly revised his assessment of the number of reinforcements to just 2,900 and Howe received notification of this on

[229] (TNA), PRO, CO 5/93, ff. 304-308, Howe to Germain, 30 Nov. 1776.
[230] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 366-367 & pp. 367-368, Germain to Howe, 18 Oct. 1776; Force, *American Archives*, Fifth Series, Vol. II, p. 1111, Germain to Howe, 18 Oct. 1776. Letters received 15 December according to *Parliamentary Register*.
[231] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 1-6, Germain to Howe, 14 Jan. 1777.

8 May, along with another letter from Germain that conveyed his opinion that the loss of Trenton was 'extremely mortifying'.[232]

Howe was now faced with mounting a single offensive, but evidence suggests he had little confidence in it achieving much in isolation. Despite his later claims that his actions were partly motivated by the desire to distract Washington from Burgoyne's progress, in a conversation with Clinton prior to setting sail from New York he stated his belief that it was unlikely the rebels would defend Philadelphia.[233] Two days later, he expressed some sympathy with the concept of moving up the Hudson, but argued that he had received consent to go to Philadelphia by sea, precluding his taking any other course of action.[234] Clinton was to mount a concerted (but ultimately futile) campaign to persuade Howe to change his mind, arguing that Philadelphia was a better target with which to close the campaign (as in Howe's original plan) than to open it.[235] He also predicted what was fairly obvious: that the more territory Howe occupied, the more troops would be needed for garrison duty and the fewer would be available for offensive operations in the future. Clinton also developed a foreboding about the fate of Burgoyne's army, doubting that it would ever reach Albany, and his disbelief over Howe's chosen course of action led to him suspecting it was actually a ruse to disguise his actual intention of acting on the Hudson.[236]

Howe's apparent lack of concern for the progress of Burgoyne's army is the most puzzling element of the campaign. He would later claim that he had no doubts

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[232] (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 104-105, Germain to Howe, 3 Mar. 1777 (including the comment on Trenton); Ibid., ff. 106-109, Germain to Howe, 3 Mar. 1777 (detailing the reduced reinforcements).
[233] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 26, Memo of conversation with Howe, 6 Jul. 1777.
[234] Ibid., f. 29, Memo of another conversation with Howe, 8 Jul. 1777.
[235] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 62.
[236] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 38, Clinton to Edward Harvey, 11 Jul. 1777; Ibid., f. 27, Clinton to Duncan Drummond, 6 Jul. 1777.

over Burgoyne's ability to progress to Albany and this seems the only reasonable explanation.[237] There is no reason to suspect that he felt in any way antagonistic towards Burgoyne, yet his sense of detachment was remarkable. In July, he commented to Clinton that he did not understand what Burgoyne's orders were.[238] On 17 July he wrote to Burgoyne to inform him that Washington had detached a corps of 2,500 men to Albany (in other words, to oppose Burgoyne's progress), proceeding immediately to state that he was taking his main army to Pennsylvania. He expected Washington to follow him but, if he instead turned his army against Burgoyne, '…and you can keep him at bay, be assured I shall soon be after him to relieve you'.[239] He then went on to point out that General Putnam was believed to be in the Hudson Highlands (between Albany and New York City) with another 4,000 men.

Howe's orders to Clinton on leaving him in command with a small garrison at New York were equivocal, but strongly biased in favour of defensive action. Clinton was at liberty to embark upon offensive operations, but only after ensuring there was no threat to the security of Manhattan, Long Island, Staten Island, Paulus Hook and Sandy Hook.[240] He was to undertake all of this with a force of less than 7,000 men present and fit for duty, including 3,000 provincials.[241] On 30 July, Howe made reference to sending reinforcements to Clinton as soon as possible and asking him to make any diversions he might think possible 'in favour of General Burgoyne's approaching Albany'.[242] Aside from this, a fake letter, intended to fall into rebel hands and 'revealing' that Howe was actually intending to take Boston and cooperate

[237] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 20.
[238] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXI, f. 29, Memo of another conversation with Howe, 8 Jul. 1777.
[239] Ibid., unf., Howe to Burgoyne, 17 Jul. 1777.
[240] Ibid., f. 35, Howe to Clinton, 9 Jul. 1777.
[241] Willcox, ed. *American Rebellion*, p. 62.
[242] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXII, f. 23, Howe to Clinton, 30 Jul. 1777.

with Burgoyne, with the Pennsylvania offensive being a ruse, was the only assistance Howe offered to the northern army.[243]

Clinton never received reinforcements from Howe, but on 24 September he did receive 1,700 British and Hessian troops from Britain. Deciding to make at least some effort to assist Burgoyne, Clinton put his plan to attack the rebel-held forts in the Hudson Highlands into operation.[244] Just four days later, he was reached by a messenger from Burgoyne, a Captain Campbell, who revealed the increasing plight of the northern army, reduced to just 5,000 men, facing 12,000 rebels in front and more behind, running short of provisions and with communications with Canada cut off.[245] Clinton sent his reply to Burgoyne and wrote to Howe, before pressing on with his assault, taking the forts and opening the route to Albany.[246] Clinton agonised over whether he should, or could, do more, until he heard from General Pigot at Rhode Island that he could spare 1,000 men. Clinton grasped this chance, organising a small corps of around 2,000 men under General Vaughan, together with six months' provisions for 5,000 men, and despatching them up the Hudson towards Albany. By 15 October this corps had reached Kingston (roughly half way to Albany from the Hudson Highlands).[247]

On 8 October, Howe wrote once more to Clinton, but far from offering him reinforcements, Howe was requesting them. Clinton was to send the 7th, 26th and 63rd Regiments, the two battalions of Anspach troops and the 17th Dragoons to Howe at Philadelphia.[248] The next day Howe wrote again. Clinton was only to hold onto the requested reinforcements if he was involved in 'a very material and essential

[243] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXII, f. 4 Howe to Burgoyne, 20 Jul. 1777.
[244] Willcox, ed. *American Rebellion*, p. 72.
[245] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXIV, f. 19, Burgoyne to Clinton, 28 Sep. 1777.
[246] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 72-77.
[247] Ibid., pp. 79-80.
[248] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXV, f. 38, Howe to Clinton, 8 Oct. 1777.

stroke'[249] which would only take a few days. Otherwise he was to send them immediately. The timing could hardly have been worse, yet in between the writing of these two letters Howe had received the forwarded message from Campbell, as well as a sketched map from Clinton outlining Burgoyne's position.[250] Clinton reluctantly recalled Vaughan's corps on 22 October.[251] On 25 October, Howe wrote again. After warmly congratulating Clinton on his successful operation in the Hudson Highlands, he suggested that he destroy the forts and return to New York, reminding Clinton to send on the reinforcements.[252] The next day, yet another letter from Howe ordered Clinton to return the 1,000 men that had been sent from Rhode Island.[253]

Howe's thinking at this stage is difficult to comprehend. Aware, from Campbell's report, of the precarious situation of Burgoyne's army, and knowing that Clinton was attempting to do something to assist, he ordered Clinton to end his operations on the Hudson, return to New York City, send him six regiments of reinforcements, numbering around 2,200 men, and cancel his request for the 1,000 troops from Rhode Island.[254] Gruber let Howe off rather lightly, portraying the situation as a simple ignoring of Burgoyne's situation.[255] Anderson believed the matter went further, claiming that in correspondence with Burgoyne, 'Sir William wrote a little like a man with an unwelcome servant forced upon him, whom he was obliged to keep busy but for whose services he felt no enthusiasm'.[256] Willcox was

[249] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXV, f. 39, Howe to Clinton, 9 Oct. 1777.
[250] Willcox, 'Too Many Cooks', p. 86 (footnote).
[251] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, pp. 80-81.
[252] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXV, f. 37, Howe to Clinton, 25 Oct. 1777.
[253] Ibid., f. 44, Howe to Clinton, 26 Oct. 1777.
[254] Ibid., Vol. XXXV, f. 1, Return at Philadelphia, 20 May 1778.
[255] Gruber, *Howe Brothers*, pp. 253-254.
[256] Anderson, *Command of the Howe Brothers*, pp. 259-260.

more damning, believing that Howe had 'destroyed what he had every reason to believe was Burgoyne's best hope'.[257]

The fact that Clinton's actions, audacious as they were, had come too late (Burgoyne surrendered his army on 17 October), does not excuse Howe's actions. At the time he wrote his letters to Clinton he had reason to believe that Burgoyne's situation was still salvageable. On 22 October Howe had written to Germain, admitting that he was aware Burgoyne had been forced to retreat, but claiming to doubt rumours that he had actually surrendered. It is possible, however, that Howe gave those rumours more credence, in which case he would surely have been wondering how his own conduct of the campaign might now be considered. Possibly foreseeing what was to come, possibly merely feeling that his position was now untenable having lost Germain's support, he then asked leave to resign his command.[258]

Howe's decision

It is easy to view the 1777 campaign as an entirely wasted one. More than that, it is possible to see very little in the way of a guiding principle behind it, a suspicion underlined by Howe's own defence of his decisions. If the commander-in-chief could not explain exactly what he had been trying to do and the thinking behind it, it left him open to criticism that here had been no clear plan. This impression, however, is an erroneous one, created by Howe feeling the need to defend his decisions in the light of Burgoyne's surrender. Each of his decisions now had to be portrayed as actually having been undertaken to *assist* Burgoyne. This led Howe down a torturous path, marked by contradictory assertions: he had to go to Philadelphia because that

[257] Willcox, 'Too Many Cooks', p. 86.
[258] WCL, Clinton Papers, Vol. XXV, f. 24, Burgoyne to Howe, 20 Oct. 1777; *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 436-438, Howe to Germain, 22 Oct. 1777.

was where Washington's army would be, yet he also went to Philadelphia to draw that army away from Burgoyne's; he criticised Germain for not ordering him to follow the Hudson strategy if that was what he had desired, yet derided Germain's prompting on that very point;[259] and he viewed it as self-evident that Burgoyne must have been given an army adequate to his needs, while constantly bemoaning the fact that he himself had not. He was forced to cite the meagre leeway he had given Clinton to act offensively as evidence of his concern for Burgoyne and finally resorted to a claim that any action by himself on the lower Hudson might have been viewed as an envy-inspired attempt to grab a share of Burgoyne's glory.[260]

It has already been demonstrated that Howe was not the clearest communicator. With the added burden of trying, retrospectively, to justify decisions in light of an unforeseen event, his defence struggled badly. Yet there was no need for this. Howe could justifiably have claimed that almost nobody, least of all Burgoyne himself, had entertained any doubts that the northern army would be safe. The date of its arrival at Albany was the only question mark (only Clinton appears to have had any doubts over it getting there at all) and Burgoyne's own letters show clearly that he had not believed assistance from Howe would be necessary to effect that. In fact, Burgoyne was so bullish he lamented the fact that his orders to progress to Albany prevented him from taking the offensive into New England, where he claimed he would be able to subdue the rebellion by the end of the year.[261] Burgoyne appeared in confident mood when a letter to Howe (dated 6 August) passed through Clinton's hands at New York (Burgoyne would later, tellingly, omit this particular letter from the published

[259] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 416-417, Germain to Howe, 18 May 1777 (received 16 Aug.).
[260] Howe, *Narrative*, pp. 16-25. Howe's defence for choosing to concentrate on Pennsylvania.
[261] J. Burgoyne, *A State of the Expedition from Canada, as Laid Before the House of Commons* (London, J. Almon, 1780), appendix xx-xxi, Burgoyne to Germain, 11 Jul. 1777.

defence of his own conduct).[262] He declared he would be at Albany by 23 August at the latest and Clinton noted that this letter did not carry any hint of an expectation of assistance.[263] Contrary to Burgoyne's expectations, of course, he encountered difficulties and by 20 August he was suddenly expressing a desire for, and expectation of, support from Howe.[264] Howe actually weakened his defence on this point, removing a passage from his narrative in which he commented on a letter from Burgoyne of 5 July, following his successful capture of Ticonderoga. 'Here, sir,' Howe had originally planned to say, 'was no symptom of the distress which afterwards befell that unfortunate general – no apprehension of future difficulties – no intimation that he either expected or wished assistance from me.'[265]

Discounting Howe's clumsy defence, his actions were defensible up to the point he heard of Burgoyne's plight and yet continued to demand reinforcements from Clinton. That is not to say that the strategy he employed (the occupation of territory in an attempt to encourage the colony of Pennsylvania to abandon the revolution) was bold, visionary or likely to bring great success, but it was a strategy. The problem was that it had such painfully limited aims, the inevitable consequence of his force being weaker (following casualties, sickness and the loss of prisoners) than it had been the previous campaign. Had all gone according to plan, as Howe allowed himself to muse during his narrative, Britain would have been in command of three colonies at the end of 1777: New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania (Howe reckoned that a successful approach to Albany by Burgoyne would not only have completed the conquest of New York, but would also have caused New Jersey to fall into line when considered

[262] Burgoyne, *Expedition from Canada*, appendix xx-xxi. Burgoyne included his letter of 11 Jul. 1777, to Germain, followed by his letter of 20 Aug. 177, also to Germain, but omitted the 6 Aug. letter to Howe.
[263] Willcox, ed., *American Rebellion*, p. 70.
[264] Burgoyne, *Expedition from Canada*, appendix xxiv-xxvi, Burgoyne to Germain, 20 Aug. 1777.
[265] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 67.

alongside the occupation of Pennsylvania).[266] A third campaign might then have carried the war into New England, or possibly subdued the southern colonies to isolate the hotbed of the rebellion (Howe apparently believed that New England, being the strongest area militarily, should be the last to be attacked, but he removed this assertion from his narrative).[267]

Also, lost in the wreckage of the 1777 campaign, is the fact that Howe had proposed a rather striking course of action. It has been overlooked by historians, perhaps for the simple reason that it was never enacted and was just part of the last of a long list of proposed courses of action provided by Howe. This was Howe's third proposition, the one requiring an additional 5,000 reinforcements in addition to the 15,000 already asked for.[268] Perhaps this unrealistic demand for reinforcements has also contributed to the plan being overlooked, but it was remarkable for one simple reason. It envisaged trapping Washington between two separate corps of Howe's army acting in conjunction, the one moving on Philadelphia by land and the other by sea. Howe only touched on the full scope of this plan when replying angrily to Germain's failure to provide the reinforcements requested, but such a large-scale pincer move was highlighted by van Creveld as rare before 1800, citing examples of where armies had marched divided for logistical reasons, but not 'as part of a successful strategic manoeuvre directed against the enemy in the field'.[269] We have no way of knowing how this plan might have unfolded, but it is evidence of rather more adventurous thinking than Howe is generally credited with.

After 8-9 October (the time when Clinton's message regarding Burgoyne reached Howe) Howe's actions were less comprehensible. Even accepting that it was,

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[266] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 21.
[267] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 57.
[268] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 377-378, Howe to Germain, 20 Jan. 1777.
[269] Van Creveld, *Command in War*, p. 25; (TNA) PRO, CO 5/94, ff. 141-145, Howe to Germain, 2 Apr. 1777.

by then, too late for him to have made a difference (and his request for reinforcements did not reach Clinton in time to stop his move on the Hudson Highlands), his apparent lack of concern over the northern army simply cannot be rationally explained. As he requested permission to hand over his post to Clinton less than two weeks later, it is reasonable to suggest that Howe had already given up any hopes of winning the war. It is also possible that he did not appreciate the full scale of Burgoyne's predicament, or believed he would, at worst, be able to retreat to safety.

For Howe, this must have been a dizzying turn of events. From the end of 1776, when his armies seemed invincible while he basked in the approbation of his King and government and planned a devastating campaign to end the rebellion, his situation had been transformed by the embarrassment of Trenton, the apparent loss of support from Germain, the final breakdown of his relationship with Clinton and the unforeseen disaster at Saratoga. He may simply have been stunned by the succession of hammer blows and unwilling, or unable, to carry on.

Conclusion

> Your military exploits have been without plan, object or decision… What advantages does England derive from any achievements of yours? To her it is perfectly indifferent what place you are in, so long as the business of conquest is unperformed, and the charge of maintaining you remains the same.[1]

Although written purely for propaganda purposes, Thomas Paine's assessment of Howe's generalship, as his army occupied Philadelphia at the end of the 1777 campaign, was pithy and perceptive, and it was an opinion shared by many. The purpose of this thesis was to attempt to find the 'plan, object or decision' in Howe's period in command of the British army, through the conception and implementation of two campaigns. The influencing factors of relationships with subordinates and politicians, the quality and composition of his army and the personal qualities Howe brought to the task have all been considered. The intention was not to resurrect a reputation or simply to contradict each element of the accepted version of Howe's command. It was merely to come to a better understanding of Howe as a general.

Arguments have been built upon a reinterpretation of well-known and previously used material, alongside new perspectives offered by the draft of Howe's narrative. For a subject starved of primary source material, the discovery of more than 80 pages of fresh evidence is obviously of vital importance and although it does not answer all of the questions swirling around Howe's generalship, it offers new insight into many of them. Howe's repugnance for punitive warfare, for instance, comes through more strongly in the draft than it does in the final version of his speech. Perhaps of equal importance, given the confusion over the strategy he chose for the 1777 campaign, is the revelation that he not only felt no obligation to cooperate with

[1] T. Paine, The American Crisis, in Mauduit, *Strictures*, p. 17.

Burgoyne's push into New York from Canada, he did not even understand what the Hudson strategy was intended to achieve. The draft also underlines Howe's lack of facility with words, clearly displaying (sometimes through repeated revisions of a single sentence) that he had agonised over how to frame his argument. The fact that he sometimes chose to omit arguments that actually made sense (most obviously when he deleted a sentence explaining how Burgoyne's early correspondence had made no mention of expecting assistance) strengthens the impression that Howe was not a gifted communicator. [2]

Although new conclusions can be proposed for some of Howe's tactical decisions (most notably at White Plains) and even for some of his strategic thinking, other elements remain impenetrable. It is simply not possible to understand Howe's thinking during key moments of the 1777 campaign, it is only possible to suggest plausible explanations. In some areas, the accepted view of Howe can be challenged and new theories can be proposed for some of his most contentious decisions. In other areas, little new light can be shed and in some cases it appears that history has actually been kind to the general. It appears, for instance, that he was even more cautious at heart than he is generally reckoned to have been.

The lack of private letters makes it difficult to assess Howe's personal relationships, but inferences can be drawn from his professional correspondence. Consideration of this, alongside the invaluable notes Henry Clinton took of meetings with Howe, reveal a mass of contradictions. In the three major relationships considered, Howe displayed markedly different characteristics. With Clinton, he was able to maintain patience and civility in the face of mounting evidence of his second-in-command's increasing contempt for him, yet with Germain he was unable to cope

[2] WCL, Strachey Papers, Draft of Howe's Narrative, f. 67.

with the first sign of a lack of confidence. In his dealings with von Heister, Howe appears to have taken an instant dislike to the Hessian general and does not seem to have made any effort to foster a more productive relationship. The von Heister and Clinton relationships suggest that Howe was a man to make quick judgements. There is evidence of an initial period of harmony between he and Clinton, suggesting that the two men instinctively liked each other when they first met, an assertion underlined by Clinton's recounting of their amicable passage to America aboard the *Cerberus*. This appears to have sustained the relationship even as Clinton drifted away into actual hostility. For whatever reason (von Muenchhausen cited von Heister's stiffness, which would not have sat well with Howe's preference for informality), there was no good first impression on which to draw when it came to the Hessian commander.[3] Repeated instances of niggling disagreements punctuated the few months they worked together and any hope of a rapprochement was dealt a fatal blow by events at White Plains. (Howe also showed himself able to bear a grudge in his dealings with Colonel Vaughan of the 46th Regiment. Loftus Cliffe noted how a personal quarrel between the two from years previously still soured the commander-in-chief's relationship with Vaughan).[4]

With Germain, there again appears to have been an initial period of harmony, although there is no evidence of warmth between the two men. Howe's inability to draw on that harmony when the relationship hit difficulties around the planning for the 1777 campaign was perhaps a symptom of the greater importance of Germain as far as Howe's situation was concerned. While a sniping second-in-command could be patiently dealt with, or even conveniently sent away to command at a separate post, a political master (the man responsible for supplying the men and materials with which

[3] Muenchhausen, *At General Howe's Side*, p. 62.
[4] WCL, Loftus Cliffe Papers, 12 Nov. 1777, Loftus Cliffe to Bartholomew Cliffe.

to wage the war and the man with the final say over whether or not a general was to retain his command) could not be marginalised. Germain's opinion may have been more important than Clinton's, but Howe's response to his perceived withdrawal of that confidence was still extreme, adding to the impression of a man prone to emotional reactions. Couple this with Clinton's revelation that Howe admitted he could not control his temper in battle and a rather different picture emerges than of the lethargic, indolent man frequently portrayed by historians.[5]

Alongside Howe's temper, there appears to have been an unwillingness to adapt to situations as they unfolded. Four important moments in the 1776 campaign illustrate this. He was not willing to allow his orders to be exceeded at the Battle of Long Island, repeatedly ordering his men to desist in their unauthorised assault on the rebel lines. Clinton, having been willing to ignore orders from Howe on that occasion, had perhaps learned his lesson by the time the British landed at Kip's Bay. Under orders only to secure the Inclenberg Heights after landing, he did that and nothing more, passing up an opportunity to advance across the island and trap a large portion of Washington's army. During the withdrawal from White Plains, Clinton's attempt to change the order of march earned a sharp response from Howe (prompting Clinton's outburst, which Cornwallis overheard) and during the pursuit of Washington through New Jersey, Cornwallis felt unable to exceed his orders to halt at Brunswick, despite the fact that he appeared close to catching the American army. Howe's inflexibility may have been his most damaging trait. Although entering the realm of speculation, it is possible to argue that it limited the scale of his successes on Long Island, at Kip's Bay and in New Jersey. The fact that he displayed the same inflexibility, and even a flash of temper, over something as simple as a proposed order of march, suggests that

[5] Stevens, ed., *Orderly Book*., p. vii.

he was unable to discern when a firm hand was vital and when his subordinates might be allowed a little leeway.

The idea that it was his uncertainty over the discipline of his army that led to this inflexibility is a persuasive one. His men appear to have been headstrong and this cost them on Breed's Hill and at the Harlem Heights. It is possible that it also resulted in increased casualties at White Plains (from the sequence of events described by Clinton, it appears that the assault on Chatterton's Hill was launched while Howe was fetching his second-in-command from the other wing of the army to lead the attack, which strongly suggests that the order to advance had not been given). This attack also proved costly and only Howe's persistence in recalling his men at the Brooklyn lines prevents us from knowing whether that moment of rashness would also have resulted in an inflated casualty list. If Howe did believe that letting his men act on their own initiative was inviting disaster, he proved that where there was time to make a considered decision, and where the enemy was not advantageously posted, he was willing to attack. He was frustrated at White Plains by a combination of factors, but nothing prevented him from launching a devastating and well-coordinated attack on Fort Washington. Howe, it appears, was not philosophically opposed to major assaults, he was merely philosophically opposed to fighting on his enemy's terms.

Tactically, Howe was capable, if not inspired. Clinton's persistent pressing for landing his army in the Americans' rear was bolder and promised far more significant results, but Howe's battles were not, as he put it, 'repugnant to sound principles'.[6] He looked to turn his enemy's flank and render his position untenable on Breed's Hill, along the Gowanus Heights and at White Plains. This was perfectly acceptable military practice. Only at Fort Washington, where there was no flank to turn and

[6] Howe, *Narrative*, p. 25.

manoeuvring the enemy out of their position was not a viable option, did he stray from this principle, opting instead to force an outnumbered foe to fight on multiple fronts against overwhelming force. It was this action that prompted Fortescue to declare: 'Howe at his best was no contemptible commander'.[7]

Strategically, Howe was also not so bereft of ideas as he appeared. Once it is accepted that he genuinely intended a full-scale assault at White Plains, his movements throughout the 1776 campaign become more coherent and consistent. His first goal was to manoeuvre Washington out of his prepared defences and only then would he consider the risk of an assault to be justified. Even prepared defences were no deterrent to an attack if, as at Fort Washington, the men holding those positions were too few in number. It seems clear that the initial focus of Howe's overall strategy was to gain control of New York. Conventional theory would contend that this was to secure the base for the implementation of the Hudson strategy, yet Howe's attitude to this could hardly have been clearer. He did not see it as the essential strategy for the campaign, did not appear to understand fully how it was supposed to be implemented (or what the benefits of its successful implementation would be) and even had doubts over his own position should the two armies form their junction along the river. Howe was willing to devote a portion of his forces to this strategy, but only as part of a multi-faceted campaign. It was never the main goal towards which he was working. In 1776 there was a clear opportunity to advance up the Hudson after Howe had forced Washington to retreat across New Jersey. He instead switched to a policy of territorial gain, hoping to encourage loyalist support. In 1777, the only way any move might have been made up the Hudson was if Germain had been able to secure the massive reinforcement necessary to implement Howe's original plan for

[7] Fortescue, *War of Independence*, p. 46.

the campaign. Howe's revised plans proved that the invasion of Pennsylvania had become his primary objective and even an offensive from Rhode Island against Boston had apparently superseded the Hudson strategy in terms of importance in Howe's thinking. With the benefit of hindsight it now seems obvious that the situation was inviting disaster. One general was operating on a single strategic goal, while another had relegated that goal to tertiary status.

The fact that Burgoyne had not expected or asked for support from Howe is often overlooked and a more circumspect approach from the commander of the northern army might well have saved that army to fight another day. Even considering this, the progress of Howe's 1777 campaign is at times extremely difficult to comprehend. There is an inescapable feeling that he had no faith in the campaign achieving much of merit. The conquest of Pennsylvania and, hopefully, the fostering of substantial loyalist support, was initially envisaged only as a complementary element in a complex and aggressive campaign. Without the support of operations from Rhode Island and New York it could not hope to deliver the dramatic results that Germain was repeatedly hinting at: the complete overthrow of the revolution. Howe's emotional nature again comes into play in considering his decision-making prior to the opening of the 1777 campaign. From a lofty position as the 1776 campaign wound down, Howe suffered two severe blows: the defeat at Trenton and the apparent loss of confidence of Germain. Already coping with a dysfunctional relationship with von Heister and possibly aware that Clinton was also by then actively hostile, this may have been more than Howe could cope with. It was certainly a shattering turn of events, but it is possible to see the characteristics of a tantrum in Howe's reaction. It was emotional and deliberately destructive. Even after a period to reassess his position and perhaps regain his equilibrium, Howe persisted with the campaign

outlined in his first, angry response to Germain. He refused to change it despite Clinton's best efforts and despite the fact that he appears to have belatedly seen the sense of picking up the pieces of the Hudson strategy. Finally, and remarkably, the best defence he could offer for persisting in his invasion of Pennsylvania was that it had been approved by Germain.

All of Howe's major operations in 1776 had been employed with the help of his brother's fleet. His only move in 1777 was undertaken in the same way, even though this entailed a month-long sea voyage to bring his army as close to Philadelphia as it had been at the end of 1776. There were sound reasons for relying on the fleet to move the army in 1776, as it allowed Howe to leapfrog rebel positions and drive them out of Manhattan without the need for a battle. In 1777 there was no clear tactical or strategic need for his men to go to Pennsylvania by sea. Originally mooted by Howe as a complementary operation, to trap Washington between two corps, the move made little sense on its own. Clinton commented on the ability of the Howe brothers to work together, citing it as their greatest strength, and this was certainly the case in 1776, but the seaborne invasion of Pennsylvania was not an effective partnership of army and navy. The only thing it unequivocally did was to remove the responsibility for the progress of the campaign from Howe and place it on his brother. While being ferried to Pennsylvania, Howe was free from the responsibilities of command and even the controversial decision to proceed via the Chesapeake rather than the Delaware was considered a purely naval matter, as shown by the line of questioning during the inquiry.[8] This suggests that Howe had decided he wanted no more of the war even before the 1777 campaign began. This would certainly explain his lack of interest in other elements of the campaign (Clinton's post at New York and

[8] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. XII, pp. 33-51. Evidence of Captain Andrew Snape Hammond.

Burgoyne's push from the north). Howe did not officially ask to be allowed to resign until October, but it seems possible he had already realised that it was inevitable. Furthermore, such an interpretation would also explain why he could offer no acceptable reasons for his operations in 1777. There were no such reasons because he was not following a considered, reasoned and purposeful campaign.

The timing of Howe's resignation is intriguing. It is possible that he was aware of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga; rumours were undoubtedly swirling.[9] If he had received reliable intelligence, then this would have been yet another hammer blow. There is no reason to suspect that Howe felt any antipathy towards Burgoyne and it is far more reasonable to suggest that he had simply never considered that his army would be in any danger. Howe's own experience of the rebels was of a disorganised rabble that repeatedly ran from battle and even the setback at Trenton had been a small-scale attack on a minor outpost. Following his conversations with Clinton, Howe would have been aware that at least some people believed he should have been cooperating with Burgoyne during the campaign and it would not have been difficult to imagine where a portion of the blame for Burgoyne's surrender was going to fall.

Two of the most damaging blows to Howe's position were delivered against other commanding officers: Rall at Trenton and Burgoyne at Saratoga. In each case, Howe could reasonably have expected each officer to have been able to cope with the situation they found themselves in, yet in each case his part in the misfortune could clearly be traced by anyone who wanted to cast doubt on his fitness for overall command. This raises the issue of one more intangible element surrounding Howe's command. Had Napoleon, as he reputedly liked to do with his generals, asked about

[9] *Parliamentary Register*, Vol. X, pp. 436-438, Howe to Germain, 22 Oct. 1777.

Howe's luck, the reply would not have been favourable.[10] Howe was perhaps not aggressive enough a commander to seize opportunity when it fleetingly presented itself, but it cannot be denied that fortune did not smile on him. If events had taken a different turn at key moments (a sudden urge to retreat for Burgoyne, a premonition of disaster for Rall, perhaps even good weather at White Plains) he may have emerged from the war with credit intact.

Yet, even though Howe was not the bumbling incompetent his harshest critics described, he deserves at least some of the blame for the reputation that has formed around him. A highly detailed explanation of his conduct, delivered to the House of Commons and published later as a pamphlet, ought to at least make it clear what he had *intended* to do while in America. Howe managed to speak for what must have been more than an hour and say very little, but he was not staging a filibuster, he was genuinely trying to absolve himself of blame for the failure to end the rebellion. Even considering his lack of eloquence his performance was poor, and the discovery of a draft of his narrative is perhaps most remarkable because it shows that the final version he delivered had actually been polished and refined. Howe was either politically naive to believe his narrative could defend his reputation, or he was extremely astute and realised that nobody was going to mount a serious assault on him. The opposition would focus on undermining Germain and North, while Germain and North would be interested only in ending the affair as quickly as possible to prevent too much scrutiny of their own record. Had the razor-sharp minds that poured scorn on Germain had motivation instead to turn their rhetoric on Howe it is hard to see how he could have escaped complete disgrace, and had he been cross-examined at his own inquiry it is difficult to imagine him giving a creditable performance. Perhaps

[10] G. R. Copley, *The Art of Victory: Strategies for Personal Success and Global Survival in a Changing World* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2006), p. 97.

then, in the opponents ranged against him on what was effectively his last battlefield, Howe was finally the recipient of a little slice of good fortune.

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